



Jains

and Vegans – and Jain Vegans

By Vanessa Clarke

In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self.

Most people's image of the Jain community is of saintly folk sweeping the ground before them and covering their mouths with fine muslin to avoid harming even the smallest creature – a particularly striking example of devotion to the overarching principle of the Jain lifestyle, that of *ahimsa*.

Often translated merely as “non-harm” or “non-violence” *ahimsa* in fact entails actively preventing harm and helping every living being in whatever way one can. For this reason, Jains avoid not only meat, fish and eggs but also root vegetables and other foods

that naturally tend to harbour micro-organisms (literally “tiny lives”). Traditionally, milk was permitted – with strict rules about the rights of both mother and calf – but increasingly in both India and elsewhere Jains are recognising that the suffering of the dairy cow and her calf make the use of milk a cause of great harm (*himsa*). Therefore, as well as actively campaigning against cruelty in the dairy industry and supporting sanctuaries such as Hugletts Wood (www.huglettswoodfarm.com),

many Jains now avoid all dairy products in their diet.

The transition is encouraged by revered figures such as the great Jain guru and Sanskrit scholar Gurudev Chitrabhanuji (the suffix *ji* denotes respect) – a passionate vegan campaigner who thought nothing of telling 7000 people at the inauguration of the new temple in Potters Bar that to be true to their religion they should all go vegan immediately and that the Vegan Society was there to help them.



The hand with a wheel on the palm symbolises the Jain Vow of Ahimsa, meaning non-violence. The word in the middle is "Ahimsa." The wheel represents the dharmacakra, to halt the cycle of reincarnation through relentless pursuit of truth.

Lord Mahavir (*Jain scripture*)

Another major tenet of the Jain faith is that truth (*satya*) has many faces, so rather than merely observing rules and rituals because that was how things were done hundreds or thousands of years ago the basic concept of *ahimsa* can and should be adapted to minimise harm in whatever new circumstances adherents find themselves. This outlook puts Jains at the forefront of multiculturalism since there is no insistence on being right while everyone else must be wrong.

As time goes on, more and more Jains are becoming vegan as part of the quest for a non-violent, cruelty-free world. Mahatma Gandhi, who was much influenced by Jain teachings, tried unsuccessfully to follow a vegan diet at a time when cow milk substitutes were non-existent and vitamin B12 was still undiscovered. If he were alive today, he would surely be delighted to find even the older generation of Jains enjoying their beloved *chai* with soya milk and commenting on how delicious it is!

DEVENDRA VIRCHAND RAICHAND SHAH (1945-2008)

Devendrabbhai (*bhai* means brother), as he was known to friends and family, was a Life Member of the Vegan Society and played a major role in bringing together the Jain community and its belief in *ahimsa* with the more secular approach of the Vegan Society to the same basic goal.

Like so many of the UK Jain community, Devendrabbhai grew up in East Africa: his parents ran a corner shop in Nairobi. As a youngster, he not only became a Queen's Scout but received his Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award from Prince Philip himself on Kenyan Independence Day. He subsequently took an honours degree in electrical engineering at Edinburgh University and put a great deal of effort into making the forced move to the UK as smooth as possible for the rest of his family.

In recent years, Devendrabbhai was increasingly passionate about both veganism and the Jain way of life, doing his utmost to bring the two communities together and striving in his own life to become simultaneously more vegan and more Jain – a living example of unity within diversity and vice versa. In his quiet and modest but extremely persistent way he spread both Jain and vegan ideas and provided a bridge between the two.

While devoting increasing amounts of time to studying and practising Jain principles, he sought to demonstrate by example – not just the best, but the only way – that whatever the situation may have been in India a thousand years ago it is incompatible with the concept of *ahimsa* to drink milk in modern Britain or, indeed, modern India. His indignation on discovering that a famous manufacturer puts gelatine in breakfast cereal and a major supermarket's own brand fruit juice contains fish products was as typical as his calm wisdom in dealing with sensitive situations.

He was always busy, but never *too* busy: we could always count on him and count him in. He always found time to help: showing interested non-Jains around the temple and patiently explaining the various rites and images; raising money for Hugletts Wood sanctuary; and even helping to design a Vegan Society advert for the Young Jains magazine. No task was too big or too small for him, and all were carried out with such unassuming grace that most people were unaware how much we all owed to his efforts – until suddenly one morning he was no longer there to offer the helping hand, the encouraging word that we had all come to expect.

A special gathering at the Potters Bar temple brought nearly 2000 people from far and wide to pay their respects – a tribute to his role in so many people's lives and the esteem in which he was held.



Whilst we all mourn Devendrabbhai's untimely departure from our midst, his legacy lives on in the existence of an active Jain-Vegan movement, which continues to bring together the two groups to which he was most passionately committed, and an increasing number of joint events up and down the country.