

Pudugala and Paramanu, The Atomic Theory of Jainism



It may seem incredible, but thousands of years before the Western world came out with the quantum theory, ancient Indians had an inkling of the existence of atoms as the building blocks of matter. References to atoms or minute particles as the smallest units of matter or substances appear in Jainism, which regards matter as an aggregate of atoms and as the source of bondage and the cause of all karma.

The original nature of Jiva is a pristine state, a mass of pure consciousness, devoid of any coarseness or grossness. It develops grossness and impurities when it enters the mundane world and becomes associated with matter and thereby the impurity of karma. Since the ancient Jain philosophers and monks viewed everything in existence as the play of matter, they considered it as their duty to study matter in its various aspects and work out a possible solution to overcome its influence upon the souls.

Aspects of The Jain Atomic Theory

The atomic theory of Jainism was thus a product of deep enquiry into the mysteries of the material world by philosopher monks, not just the idle curiosity of scholarly minds. They saw in that astounding discovery, the possibility of a hidden solution to the problem of human suffering.

Further, one can see from the description of atoms in the Jain texts that what the Jainas regard as the smallest units of matter have more in common with the subatomic particles (quanta) which form part of the atoms rather than atoms themselves. Therefore, it is probably more appropriate to refer to the atomic theory of Jainism as the quantum theory. The following is a brief account of the salient features of the atomic or quantum theory of Jainism.

Pudugala: Matter is referred to as pudugala in Jainism. It is considered an aggregate of individual atoms (paramanu) held together by the forces of Nature. Depending upon the type of atoms involved, the matter may assume varying degrees of fineness or coarseness and accordingly impact the lives of various types of jivas or beings who are caught in the mire of samsara (the cycle of births and deaths) and the law of karma.

Nature of Atoms: According to the atomic theory of Jainism, an atom is without any point, without a beginning and without an end. It is eternal, which can neither be created nor destroyed but which can in association with other atoms become part of any object. It is invisible and imperceptible to the senses. However, adepts (Jinas) can perceive it through omniscience or the all-knowing vision.

Skandas: Atoms of unlike nature come together to form a skanda or a kind of compound atom. Everything that you find in the world is aggregates of atoms only. All the objects are formed by the combination of various types of atoms, while the world itself is a much bigger aggregation of individual and compound atoms or skandas. The atoms show two types of activity or movement, a directional movement from one point to another and a more complex transformative one, which involve the change of its state or condition.

The Quantum Nature of Atoms: The Jain theory of atoms further proposes that atoms can travel at incredible speeds from one part of the universe to another. They may traverse the entire universe in a matter of moments. All atoms are the same in their essential nature. However, by coming together in various permutations and combinations, they make possible the diversity of our world. (According to modern quantum theory, subatomic particles can travel to any part of the universe. They may also simultaneously exist at different places in the universe and they can be part of any substance.)

Souls and Atoms: The individual souls who exist in varying states of freedom and bondage are not made up of matter. However, in the phenomenal existence, they become bound by them. The bodies of the beings and the sense objects are essentially made up of atoms only. The souls which come into contact with them become bound until they are freed through self-purification, which can be accomplished by practicing Dharma by means of virtuous conduct, austerities and renunciation. To become completely free from matter in all forms and conditions is the noble goal and the ultimate aim of every follower of Jainism.

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