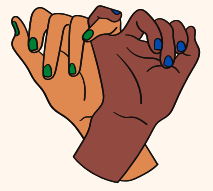




Black Lives Matter

An Open Letter to the Jain Community



Jai Jinendra,

We hope this letter finds you well during these difficult times. My Jain friends and I wrote this to educate our community about the current events in the world, especially the Black Lives Matter movement. We urge you to read this entire letter with an open mind. In advance, Michhami Dukkadam.

A History

From the beginning of American History, Black Americans have been oppressed. Brought over against their wills, as slaves, Black Americans built this country from the ground up with no rights of their own. In 1865, the 13th amendment abolished slavery. However, racist policies called Jim Crow Laws were created which prevented Black Americans from being truly equal, by blocking them from voting or attending good schools. The Civil Rights Movement did see some movement away from these policies. However, systemic racism (a form of racism expressed in the practice of social and political institutions) has not stopped - rather, it has just taken new forms, such as police brutality and mass incarceration.

Black men have a 1 out of 1000 risk of being killed during a police encounter (2.5x higher than the risk for White men), and 99% of these killings result in no repercussions for the officer at fault. Beyond this, despite exhibiting the same levels of crime, Black Americans are 6 times more likely to be incarcerated. 1 in 4 Black men go to jail, and are stripped of basic rights such as housing and the ability to vote.



Why Should We Care As Jains?

“**Parasparopagraho Jīvānām,**” (from the Tattvartha Sutra), translates to “living beings render service to one another.” We must use our voices in service of our fellow humans in their struggle to be accepted as equals. Caring for all life includes all races.

The principle of **Ahimsa** means to maintain nonviolence through *maan-vachan-kaya* (thought, speech, deed). This means to not commit racist actions, speak racist words, or think racist thoughts. We should take the step to be actively anti-racist, rather than remaining silent. We urge you to reflect on ways in which we can stop violence towards Black people in this country.

You may be asking how Ahimsa can apply, despite the riots/violence occurring. Firstly, most of the protests occurring are entirely peaceful. Some of the violence and looting is instigated by those that aim to undermine the efforts of Black organizers. However, yes, some of the looting has been initiated by protestors. And while we understand that seeing this “looting” may cause discomfort, we ask you to see it in the context of centuries of largely non-violent resistance by Black people. Of course, it is not the preferred method of protest. If we are to reach a point of peace and non-violence in this country, Black people must be heard by all of us.

George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor’s deaths may have been the catalysts, but these issues have existed in our country for centuries. Material goods lost in the riots and looting are not nearly as important as the countless human lives lost to police brutality, incarceration, and slavery.



Satya asks us to speak the harmless truth. In following this mahavrata, we must ask ourselves how we will speak the truth in this scenario. How can we acknowledge and expose racism in our country, and declare that black lives matter?

Asteya means to not take anything not properly given to us. Since before the United States of America were formally established, Black people's lives and labor have been stolen from them day after day. How will we help them to take back their lives, rights, and dignities?

Aparigraha means non-attachment. In the United States, most of us are privileged enough to experience success and financial stability. These qualities are often attributed to ourselves and the community - to "my people." We ask that the idea of personal welfare be discarded in favor of collective welfare. If it is non-attachment we care about, why is it that we seem to care so strongly about businesses being demolished while paying minimal attention to centuries of Black lives being taken? We should also note that Aparigraha encourages us to donate freely, whether it be to various bail funds, the NAACP, or other verified organizations.

Anekantvada means to see from all points of view. We cannot know what it feels like to be Black in America and be in fear for our lives at any given moment. However, as Jains, we should strive to remain educated. The resources exist - we just have to seek them out and approach with an open mind. Also, while we may not loot in protest, using Anekantvada, we cannot tell another group what the "right way" to protest is.

Why Should We Care As Indians?

If you are living in America, you directly benefit from the Civil Rights movement. In 1927, the Asian Exclusion Act prevented all immigration from Asia, to maintain a white America that was "untainted" by "inferior cultures."



The work done by the Black activists in the Civil Rights movement led to the creation of new policies replacing the Asian Exclusion Act which allowed us to start our lives here.

Black America supported us, and we need to support them.

You may now be thinking - I worked hard to get to where I am - why can other groups not do the same? Yes we have worked tirelessly, and deserve our achievements. As Indians, we have some of the highest education rates and median family incomes. Some may use our success as an argument to “prove” that America is not racist. However, this downplays the impact of systemic racism on Black Americans which has led to unequal opportunities. We may face day to day racism, but Black Americans face systematic racism on a whole different level.

Another thing you may be thinking is “I believe ALL lives matter.” Of course, all lives do, and should, matter. However, the Black Lives Matter movement is a response to Black Americans’ lives being ignored and treated as less valuable for centuries. If your home is on fire, the firefighters will focus their resources on saving your house, while not aiming resources at other homes nearby. Of course, the other homes matter as well, but they are not the ones in desperate need.

It is our duty to speak the truth, to fight for a world in which violence is unnecessary to bring attention to the plight of oppressed people.

Sincerely,

Sara Jain, Sahana Mehta

Edited By Umang Lathia, Pranay Patni



Inspiration and ideas drawn from the work of Kavya Balaji, Shilpa Bhat, Shefali Mangtani, and Audreela Deb (“South Asians Supporting BLM”).

If we have written anything which has hurt or upset you in any way, or which goes against the teachings of Mahavir Swami, we humbly ask for your forgiveness. From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you for reading with an open mind. Once again, Michhami Dukkadam.