

## Neelam's journey

We met Neelam Lalwani for the first time during Paryushana, the Jain festival of forgiveness. To her, forgiveness does not begin and end with the festival, but is something that needs to be practiced everyday. She exuded a sense of kindness that stayed with us, and we arranged to meet her once again to understand her idea of Jainism.

“Instead of introducing myself as a Jain, I try to let my conduct reflect Jain principles; otherwise it may become a conflict between religious identity rather than about the conduct of life.”



Over the course of her life, Neelam's ideas about Jainism transformed. Having grown up in an orthodox family, all the Jain rituals and customs were ingrained in her, but the reasons behind them were not always made clear. Later in life, after tragedy struck, these very same Jain principles,

especially the ideas of *karma* and acceptance provided a source of comfort.

**“Karma might be the reason we met”**

The Jain worldview holds that all beings undergo reincarnations till they are liberated from the cycle of birth and death. This process is guided by one’s actions, embodied in *karma*. The nature of *karma* is thought to be a form of very subtle particles which get attached to the soul and entangle it with this world.

Neelam is very interested in understanding how *karma* influences her life. She says that it is the one thing she believes in very strongly. She feels that because we are all connected, things will even out in this life or the next.

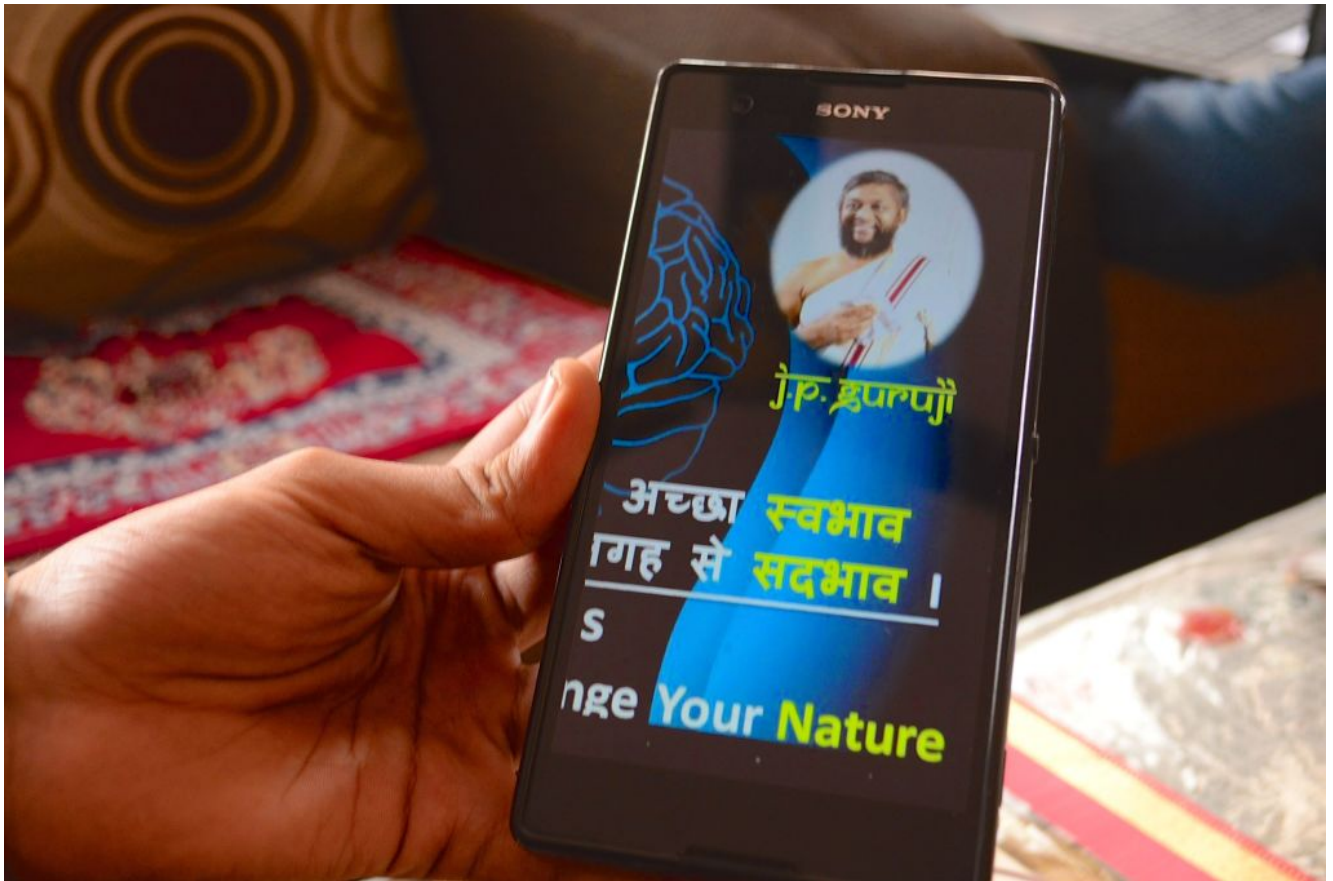
She tried to explain her idea of *karma* by telling us that because we came to her home, spoke to her and shared food with her, we must either be related by *karma* from a previous life or we are creating karma that will bind us through subsequent lives.

The idea of inspecting action and consequence seems reflected in various ways in Neelam’s worldview.



Neelam explained how she reasoned out the inner meanings behind the Jain practices. “Often, these practices were started for reasons which are not relevant anymore but they continue to exist because people become superstitious,” said Neelam. “In fact, I myself end up following rituals and religion which I have habitually known. I try to slowly reduce symbolic rituals, but it is not easy to move past old habits.”

Indeed, she seems keen to interpret Jain ideals in a practical way. She confirmed that following religion thoughtfully has helped her flourish and find happiness.



“If everyone followed Jainism instead of just calling themselves Jain, many of the problems of the world will be solved. We do things mostly by imitation, but I think we need to get over our divides and labels. We’re all the children of one mother.”

Indeed, many of her ideas and conclusions are not isolated, but have been distilled through her own experience of life.

### **Family matters**

Neelam, who is now forty six, was married at the age of twenty two. However, at the age of thirty five she tragically lost her husband to a heart attack. She already had two young sons and was initially not planning to marry again. She had a change of mind, and slightly over a year later, she later married Shankar Lalwani, and has happily been with him for a decade.





Neelam also has one daughter from Shankar's first marriage. Neelam's daughter is only nine years younger than she is. Despite this being unusual, Neelam said that the relationship between her and her daughter has always been very loving. The feeling of mutual acceptance was present from the beginning.

Neelam is also blessed with two grandchildren from her daughter who call her '*supernani*', or 'supergranny'. Neelam told us she feels lucky to have been a part of so many loving families.

### **Practice, not preaching**

Neelam's idea of family is indicative of the current journey she is on, reflecting on her experiences, and how Jainism has shaped her.

Neelam practices restraint in life in many ways. For example, she cooks only what is required, and shares food if there is extra. They don't waste food or eat food that is left for days. She tries to teach water conservation to her children

and her staff. “We didn’t use firecrackers for Divali. You know, it’s interesting, when people use science as a reason to not use firecrackers because it causes noise and air pollution, everyone listens. When we use Jainism as a reason, because countless minute organisms are being killed, people don’t understand.”

While she did say that no one belongs to each other in the end, referring even to her own children, she also said that “If you are able to give love to someone, no matter who they are, they become yours.” She smiled and added, “Now that you have come here and I have given you love, you also belong to me, isn’t it?”



She further explained that to her, being a true Jain means looking inside yourself for answers. She doesn’t go to *mandir*, or temple, everyday. “Worship—to me—does not mean going to *mandir* and asking *Bhagavan*, or God, for the answers. Mahavira was a man who took the time to introspect his own life. Chanting Mahavira’s name won’t make me like Mahavira; I have



to take the qualities of Mahavira and apply them in my life. We have to find the answers ourselves; we have to ask ourselves who we are and where we're going."

### **Applying Jainism**

She had similar ideas about her business. Praying for things will not make them happen. She had to make them happen.

Neelam runs an event planning company in Bangalore that handles weddings, family events and corporate functions. She built the company from scratch with the support of her husband.

"I've learned so much by observing how my husband interacts with people. His ability to see the good in people and look past people's tendency to be selfish has helped me look at the bigger picture in life." Her husband has also helped her practice forgiveness.



Neelam doesn't treat her clients just as paying customers, but as souls she is helping. She involves herself in her work in a

way she feels may be most useful. For example, she often offers words of advice for the young couples she meets through her wedding events.

“The most important thing to remember is not to expect anything from anyone. If you need something, you must communicate it, otherwise feelings will be hurt and resentment will build. Being open with your partner—or any other person in your life—is the way to ensure respect and happiness. Accept each other,” she explains.

While Neelam is open to contemporary ideas about dating, she does hesitate about cultures mixing. In the journey of her life, she has faced enough obstacles without having to add the idea of a mixed-marriage, so her belief is that with everything else that could go wrong, having the same background does help.

One day, Neelam hopes to become less materialistic and lead a more meditative life, but when asked about the possibility of taking *diksha*, or becoming a nun, she acknowledged that it wasn't for her. Becoming an ascetic isn't something she is ready to take on, but she does want to get more involved in contributing to the community. Her hope is to open an old-age home. She feels that in our society, it is usually the elderly that are the most neglected.

### **The most important thing**

Neelam has changed her way of thinking over the years. She believes that *karma* works on all people, following any religion, and it's not just Jains who have the ability to reach *moksha*. “*Karma* is a balance sheet that continues until you hit a ‘zero/zero’ balance.”





*Karma* is also a reason not be 'fake' according to Neelam. "Your actions are always going to be attached to you. Don't think anything that you're doing is for society or anyone else, because at the end of the day your karma is only yours. Remember that nothing on this planet belongs to us. Everything is temporary."

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