

ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES OF JAINISM

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Abstract

Jainism upholds non-violence (*ahimsā*) to be the remedy for all miseries, sufferings or cruelties of life. The threat to life, for Jainism, arises from a faulty epistemology and metaphysics as much as from a faulty ethics. The *anekāntavāda* provides an ontological basis for the principle of non-violence and similarly *syādvāda* can easily plead the case of biodiversity. Environmental justice posits the issue of interspecies and intra-species justice. Consumerism is based on the assumption that the universe is a collection of dead objects. Jain ecology is based on spirituality and equality. It recognizes the fundamental natural phenomenon of symbiosis or mutual dependence, which forms the basis of modern ecology. Hence, the discipline of non-violence, the recognition of universal interdependence and the doctrine of manifold aspects as all these lead inexorably to the avoidance of dogmatic, intolerant, inflexible, aggressive and utilitarian attitudes towards the world around.

Keywords: Ahimsā, Anekāntavāda, Syādvāda, Ecocentric, Anthropocentric, Consumerism, Justice, Interdependence.

I

Man has shown himself capable of the knowledge to give him certain mastery over his environment. The danger to man in the future comes not from nature, but from man himself. John Passmore in his '*Man's Responsibility for Nature*' argues that the *Old Testament* (*Genesis* in particular) not only confers on man's dominion over nature, but also leaves open the possibility for an

attitude of absolute despotism towards nature on the part of mankind.¹ Man must let go his technological and material narcissism because there cannot be real responsible or effective environmental ethics in a world "dominated by technological mentality and *crass* materialism." Only by creating a workable environmental ethic and world conservation strategy, can there be a chance for human survival. The root of the ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis of self-centered greed, aided and abetted by ingenious technologies no longer properly restrained. Pollution, extinction of species, and destruction of forests and wild life are crimes against the earth and against humanity. The most urgent task of both science and religion is to assert the unity and sacredness of creation, and to reconsider the role of humans in it. Traditional Jain teaching can serve to remind the world of the power and complexity of nature as well as the moral advantage of living simply according to the vows associated with non-violence. Lily de Silva maintains that "We have to understand that pollution in the environment has been caused because there has been psychological pollution within ourselves. If we want a clean environment, we have to adopt a lifestyle that springs from a moral and spiritual dimension." We have to follow a simple, moderate life style eschewing both extremes of self-deprivation and self-indulgence. Satisfaction of basic human necessities, reduction of wants to the minimum, frugality and contentment are its important characteristics. With such a lifestyle, humanity will adopt a non-exploitative, non-aggressive, caring attitude towards nature.²

Jainism upholds non-violence (*ahimsā*) to be the remedy for all miseries, sufferings or cruelties of life. It is a universal law, a rational maxim designed to govern all of one's actions. The *ahimsā* in its manifold aspects has received a comprehensive treatment in *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*. We are here told that all love life and hate death and suffering. Restrain yourself and you will be emancipated from suffering. The violent person is one who is unmindful of and addicted to worldly pleasure. The *Ācārāṅga Sūtra's* approach to the

interrelationship of living being is very much like that of the Upanisads, which also emphasize the inter-connectedness of life. This is clear from the identification of the killer and killed in the following verse that explains the essential nature of *ahimsā* : "You are the one whom you intend to kill, you are the one you intend to tyrannize, you are the one you intend to punish and drive away. The enlightened one who lives up to this dictum neither kills nor cause others to kill. Bondage and emancipation are within yourself."³ From a Jain epistemological perspective, the threat to life that we face arises from a faulty epistemology and metaphysics as much as from a faulty ethics. The moral failure to respect the life of others, including life-forms other than human, is rooted in dogmatic, but mistaken, knowledge claims that fail to recognize other legitimate perspectives. It is because existence itself being complex, subtle and many sided (*anekāntic*), unless the knowledge that grounds action reflect this many-sidedness of reality, it will produce actions that are destructive of existence opposed to the interests of the agent's own limited and biased perspective. The ideological dogmatism underlying violence is grounded in epistemological claims that, though limited and only partially true, are mistaken for absolute truths. The alternative epistemology of Jainism as *syādvāda* can support dialogue and negotiation among diverse perspectives and claims. Violence proceeds from intolerance rooted in ideological absolutism, *ahimsā* requires a firm foundation for tolerance, a foundation provided by the philosophy of *anekānta*. The *anekāntavāda* philosophy can be seen as providing an ontological basis for the principle of non-violence. The perspectivalism embodied in the theory of epistemic standpoints (*nayavāda*) and the sevenfold scheme (*Saptabhaṅgi*) of qualified predication (*syādvāda*) recognizes that ordinary, non-omniscient knowledge claims are always limited by the particular standpoint on which they are based. Consequently, claims from one perspective must always be balanced and complemented by claims from other perspectives. This has important ecological implication

for it legitimizes considerations from non-human perspectives, enabling us to consider the effects of our actions on non-human life forms and environments. Hence, realistic and relativistic pluralism of Jainism as formulated in *anekāntavāda* has better prospects for ecological preservation than monistic idealism. Similarly *syādvāda* can easily plead the case of biodiversity and finally the non-violence (*ahimsā*) and non-possession (*aparigraha*) are to be practiced and preferred for environmental preservation as compared to faulty hedonistic ethics being reflected in materialistic outlook.

II

Eco-centric model of environmental ethics is the holistic theory according to which the whole ecosystem comprising both the biotic and a-biotic parts of nature deserves moral worth. Water or air would be given moral consideration because plants, animals and humans are dependent on them for sustaining life. From a Jain perspective, a justification for the preservation of the environment need not be based on earth, water and air having only derivative value in their support of life. Rather they should be accorded moral consideration in their own right. Each of these physical elements can form the physical (*audārika*) body for a soul (*jīva*), which may be distinguished from all other existents by the quality (*guna*) of consciousness or awareness (*caitanya*).⁴ Jainism is known for distinctive path to liberation (*mokṣa-mārga*), an intertwined set of doctrines, practices and worldwide assumptions focusing on the ultimate liberation of the human soul from bondage. But the *mokṣa-mārga*, ideology is not very conducive to the development of an environmental ethic. We find it here that the goal of human life is permanent separation of the soul from all matter. In such a dualist ideology positive environmental results are largely incidental.⁵ But the *mokṣa-mārga*, ideology is not the whole of Jainism, as Jainism is also a religious culture that provides people with the definition of good life or well being. Jainism cannot be reduced to just world

renunciation in all its many forms, rather it also involves responsible, moral action, including action concerning and within the environment.

The Jain worldview posits the near ubiquity of souls in the universe. Each of these souls in its ideal form is identical in its qualities of bliss, energy, and omniscience, but due to each soul's unique karmic history, these souls are embodied in various forms. Jain biology distinguishes these forms in terms of different kind of bodies (*kāya*) ranging from those with five senses through those with just single sense organism. Thus focus on the many possible embodied states of the soul can help mitigate the dualism of *jīva* and *ajīva*. Further, the Jain understanding of the possible range of bodies extend beyond the normal worldview, for bodies include not only animals and plants, but also such forms as air, water and earth. The recent debate of environmental ethics in the form of whether nature has instrumental value or intrinsic worth finds place in Jainism in another fashion by accepting the human responsibility (moral) towards all bodies in cardinal principle of non-violence. The practice of *ahimsā* involves mind, body and speech, and so is a matter of intention as much as of action. It involves not only what we ourselves think, do and say, but also the public approval (*anumodana*) or censor (*nindā*) of the thoughts, actions, and words of others. Introducing *anumodana* and *nindā* into the understanding of *ahimsā* means that Jains are expected to be interventionist in their ethics. To stand by idly while someone else acts us a way that is harmful to the environment involves the bystander as much as the actor in the moral harm of the deed. A Jain is expected to observe *ahimsā* in the past, present and future. This means that one has a moral responsibility for prior harmful actions, both one's own and those of others. It also means that one has moral responsibility to the future. Allowing environmental degradation today is not only violence in the present, it is also violence in the future. While *ahimsā* has not traditionally been expressed in terms of right the understanding of one's moral

responsibility for *ahimsā* in future might bear fruitful comparison with discussions by eco-centric ethicists on the right of future beings to be born into a healthy environment. The understanding of *ahimsā* as applying to the fullest range of bodies is found in the rite of *pratikramana* performed twice daily by Śvetāmbara mendicants and at least once a year by laity. The rite begins with the individual recognizing and seeking to absolve himself or herself from the karmic consequences of any form of harm caused to a wide array of life forms, in bodies with from one to five senses. Hence, this rite of confession could be creatively adopted by Jains as an environmental ritual.

Environmental justice posits the issues of interspecies justice and intra species justice. Just as non-human species have right to live, so do all human have the right to a safe, secure and sustainable livelihood. This issue of over consumption in environmental justice is addressed in Jainism by non-possession (*aparigraha*) and non-stealing (*asteya*). The vow of *asteya* is usually understood to mean, simply, not stealing, but in textual discussion it is more broadly understood to entail not taking anything that has not been freely given, whether by a person or by another living creature. This could easily be read to mean that many of the ways in which one accumulates resources within the industrial capitalist system, whether from nature or other humans, are morally problematic. The vow of *bhogopabhoga-parimāṇa* or enjoying the consumption of a number of forbidden items is generally applied only to diet but could easily be extended to over consumption more generally. The vow of *anarthadanda* or enjoying a number of harmful occupation and activities is also usually understood to refer to a narrow range of occupation that clearly violates *ahimsā*. In a similar fashion the five *samitis* or rules of conduct, that amplify the mendicants great vows⁶ could be fruitfully applied to environmental awareness. Care in walking (*iryā-samiti*) could call for one to pay attention to the environmental consequences of all one's modes of transport. Care in accepting things (*eṣaṇa-samiti*)

could be expanded to entail considering the environmental history of objects that came into one's life, from modes of extraction and production to modes of transportation, marketing and selling. Care in picking up and putting down things (*ādāna-nikṣepaṇa-samiti*) clearly calls on to pay attention to one's surroundings. Finally care in the performance of excretory functions (*utsarga-samiti*) calls on one to investigate what happens both to waste items that one disposes of personally and waste that is a by-product of extractions and manufacturing processes.

III

Brian Swimme is of the opinion that our deadened view of the material has led to the plight of consumerism, where ultimate meaning of life is mistakenly sought in the accumulation of things. Consumerism is based on the assumption that the universe is a collection of dead objects. It is for this reason the depression is a regular feature in every consumer society. When humans find themselves surrounded by nothing but objects, the response is always loneliness.....⁷ However, just as Swimme contends that the consumerist obsession with "dead" objects leads to depression, in Jainism, the abuse and manipulation of materiality leads to thickening of one's karmic bondage, guaranteeing a lower existence in this and future lives. Swimme suggests that the things of the world be regarded as a celebration of the originary moment of creation, that people turn their attention to the beauty and mystery of creation as an antidote to the trivialization of life brought about by advertisements and accumulations. Jainism similarly asserts that things share commonality in their aliveness, which must be acknowledged and protected. Through respect for life in all its forms, including microganism and the elements, one can ascend to a higher stage of spiritual sensitivity. In this way both Jainism and contemporary scientific account provide an occasion to view the world as a living, dynamic process that, in the contemporary context of environmental degradation, requires protection and care.

The *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* has described a world suffused with life. It is from the livingness of all things, Jainism developed an extensive theory of *Karma* to account for the existence of various life-forms. For *Karmic* theory each life-form will eventually take on a new existence as part of the ongoing process of *samsāra*, to be halted only when one, as a human being, attains spiritual liberation (*Kevala*). Jainism proclaims that even seemingly inanimate things or objects, such as rocks and rivers, are in fact subjects possessing life force or *jīva*, suffused with consciousness, energy, and bliss, as well as with a sense of touch. Hence, we are expected to cultivate the ethical behaviour of recognition and respect towards nature. In the second part of the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, Mahāvīra addresses his monks and nuns about forest preservation. It also shows the timelessness of human greed and exploitation of the natural world. He regarded trees as inherently valuable for beauty, strength and life supporting. For Mahāvīra, adopting a legitimate means of livelihood (*nyāyopatta-dhana*) is extremely important as the chosen occupation determines the degree to which violence can be restricted. Jainism prefers whenever possible to engage in those occupations where harm to human beings, animals and plants is minimized. However, when injury does arise in the course of performing one's occupation (*ārambhaja-himsā*), it is thought to produce less severe negative Karmic effects than acts of violence promoted by greed and anger.⁸ Acts of violence and greed must in the long run result in poverty and pain, whereas acts performed out of generosity, charity and compassion lead to a happier and more prosperous life.

IV

Mahāvīra endowed humanity with a fundamental thought upon which behaviour patterns and relationship with the environment could ideally be based. An equality of all forms of life and reverence for all of them is his central teaching. He taught "As you want to live, do so to others." In that definition of "others", he

embraced not only all living beings that can move, but also the existence of air, water, earth and vegetation. The global ecological crisis cannot be solved until a spiritual relationship is established between humanity as a whole and its natural environment. Jainism therefore says that the function of souls is to help one another (*parasparopagraho jivānām*).⁹ Jain ecology is based on spirituality and equality. Each life-form, plants or animals, has an inherent worth and each must be respected. The fundamental principle of Jainism is to aspire for yourself. Do not aspire for others (*Jam icchasi appanatto, jam ca nam icchasi appanatto/Tam iccha parassa vi yā, ettiyam jinasasanam//*)¹⁰ It is because one sees others as not different from oneself, an ecological view can arise that sees sanctity in all other persons as well as in plants and animals. Jain cosmology gives paramount importance to mountains, rivers, trees and other natural resources. Jain Tirthānkaras received their spiritual attainment meditating under trees, on mountains, and on the banks of rivers. These natural resources have been enshrined as sacred in Jain art and architecture. The Jain tradition is one that considers ecology as indispensable part of both spirituality and material life. Jainism tries to shape our attitude towards nature by prescribing humane and non-violent approaches to everyday behaviour. Jain ecology comprises *ahimsā*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacarya* and *aparigraha*. *Ahimsā* means avoidance of harmful thought, speech and action. It involves freeing oneself of any ill will and refusing to entertain any negative thought. *Ahimsā* enhances good will, positive thought, loving action and restraint. The *satya* means understanding and realizing the true nature of existence and true nature of oneself. Living in truth means we avoid manipulating people or nature because there is no one single truth that any mind can grasp or tongue can express. *Asetya* amounts to refraining from acquiring goods and services beyond our essential needs. The distinction between need and greed can be blurred and therefore the examination of need should be carried out with honesty. The literal meaning of *asteya* is "Do not steal". If you take more from nature

that meets your essential needs then you are stealing from nature. If we are using up finite resources at a greater speed than they can be replenished, then we are stealing from future generations. *Brahmacarya* is closely associated with the conduct of sexual behaviour. It is love without lust. Any thought, speech or acts that demean, debase or abuse the body are against the principle of *brahmacarya*. It not only recognizes the dignity of the human body, but also the body of nature. For Jains, ecology means living in a relationship of fidelity with nature. The principle of *aparigraha* means non-accumulation and non-possessiveness. We do not own anything; everything belongs to itself. Nature is abundant, as there is enough for everybody's need but not enough for anybody's greed. *Aparigraha* means sharing or living simply, without ostentation and without a display of wealth. When we spend too much time in the care of possessions there is no time for the care of the soul. It amounts to not acquiring unnecessary items because whatever you acquire will bind you tightly. Hence, freeing yourself from non-essential acquisitions and from materialism be regarded as corrective step for ecological preservation. *Aparigraha* is a form of "holy poverty" or "voluntary simplicity." We could even call it "down sizing" that is a process of consuming less for the benefit of the self and others.

Jainism treats the whole of existence as part of its moral community. Moral worth is established through interactions with the non-human world. Jains do not believe in God to be the creator of the universe and therefore salvation is not sought through a relationship with the divine. Instead, nature becomes a moral theatre, within which one's ethical being is established, cultivated and judged. *Ahimsā* is the central practice in the quest for liberation because it defines- negatively- a state of purity and detachment within a violent, passionate world. It is an ethic of non-interference and a method of disconnecting or separating oneself from the violence of everyday life. We see that in Jainism, the moral self is created through a retreat from the rest of nature. In Jainism human

moral is established through restraint, stemming from a recognition that we share this world with a multitude of living things, all of whom are in bondage, but are on the same path as we are to eventual liberation. Although Jains treat human embodiment as a privileged and exalted one, they do not believe that humans possess anything uniquely or exclusively that should entitle them to their superior status. There exists five categories of living beings in Jain cosmology, each being having either one, two, three, four or five senses. The greater the number of senses, the greater the self-awareness and, therefore, the greater the ability to understand worldly existence as a state of bondage, and thereby there is a need of escape from it. But, an increase in the number of senses does not mean greater moral worth. It is the possession of a soul, and not the stage of development nor the number of sense a being possesses, that entitles one to a life of dignity and respect. Consciousness is the inalienable characteristic of every *jīva*, however undeveloped it may be. It is present even in the *nigodas* (the least developed life form) and, through its progressive development the *nigoda* too may culminate in the supreme state of the soul, namely omniscience.

The Jain ecological philosophy is virtually synonymous with the principle of non-violence. It prescribes non-violence (*ahimsā*) not only towards human beings but towards entire nature. In the strife torn world of hatred and hostilities, aggression and aggrandizement, and of unscrupulous and unbridled exploitation and consumerism, the Jain perspective finds the evil of violence writ large. The teaching of *ahimsā* refers not only to wars and visible physical acts of violence but also to violence in the hearts and minds of human beings, their lack of concern and compassion for their fellow humans and for the natural world. Māhavīra proclaimed a profound truth for all times to come when he said “one who neglects or disregards the existence of earth, air fire, water and vegetation disregards his own existence which is intertwined with them.” This is the principle of interdependence (*parasparopagrah jīvanām*). Jain cosmology recognizes the

fundamental natural phenomenon of symbiosis or mutual dependence, which forms the basis of modern ecology. Life is viewed as a gift of togetherness, accommodation and assistance in universe teeming with interdependent constituents. The concept of universal interdependence is inherent in *anekāntavāda*. It describes the world as a multifaceted, every changing reality is endowed with an infinity of viewpoint depending on the time, place, nature and state of the one who is viewer and that which is viewed. This leads to the doctrine of relativity or *syādvāda*, which states that truth is relative to different viewpoints (*nayas*). Absolute truth cannot be grasped from any particular viewpoint alone because absolute truth is the sum total of all the different viewpoints that make up the universe. Jainism does not look upon the universe from an anthropocentric, ethnocentric or egocentric viewpoint because it is rooted in the doctrine of *anekāntavāda* and *syādvāda*. It takes into account the viewpoint of other species, other communities and nations and other human beings. The discipline of non-violence, the recognition of universal interdependence and the logic of the doctrine of manifold aspects, all these lead inexorably to the avoidance of dogmatic, intolerant, inflexible, aggressive, harmful and utilitarian attitudes towards the world around. It inspires the personal quest of every Jain for equanimity (*samyaktva*) towards both animate and inanimate being (*jīva evam ajīva*). It encourages an attitude of give and take and of live and let live. It offers a pragmatic peace plan based not on the domination of nature, nations or other people, but on an equanimity of mind devoted to the preservation and balance of the universe. *Ahimsā* is an aspect of compassion, charity and empathy described by the great Jain teacher as "the beneficent mother of all beings" and "the elixir for those who wander in suffering through the ocean of successive "rebirths." *Jīva dayā* means caring for and the sharing with all living beings, tending, protecting and serving them. It entails universal friendliness (*maitri*), universal forgiveness (*kshamā*) and universal fearlessness (*abhaya*). It is this conception of

life and its eternal coherence, in which human beings have an inescapable ethical responsibility that made the Jain tradition a cradle for the creed of environmental protection and harmony.

Notes and References :

1. Passmore, John, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*. pp. 26-27.
2. De Silva, Lily, "The Hill Wherein My Soul Delights : Exploring the Stories and Teachings", in *Buddhism and Ecology*, edi. Batchelor and Brown, p. 29.
3. *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, Today and Tomorrow's Printers and Publishers, New Delhi, 1981, 1.1.5. 101-2; 3.1.5.2.36.
4. Jaini, Padmanabh S., *The Jaina Path of Purification*, Berkley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1979, pp. 90-91 and pp. 97-106.
5. Jainism is by no means unique among the world's religious traditions in this ideological focus on a soteriology that in the end either devalues or negates altogether the material world of day to day existence.
6. Jaini, Padmanabh S., *The Jaina Path of Purification*, pp. 247-48.
7. Swimme, Brian, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos : Humanity and the New Story*, Maryknoll, N.Y : Orbis Books, 1996, p. 33.
8. Jaini, Padmanabh S., *The Jaina Path of Purification*, p. 171.
9. *Tattovārtha Sutra* 5.21 published in the *Sramana Siddhānta Pathvali*, Kunthuvijaya Granthamālā Samiti, Jaipur, 1982, p. 268.
10. Samkalaka, Jitendra Varni, *Samasa Sutta*, Agama Prakashana, Ravadi, 1996, Gāthā 24, p. 7. This Gāthā emphasizes : "What you desire for yourself, desire for others too. What you do not desire for yourself, do not desire for others."