

# Modern Jainism: Dharma of Sustainability and Sustainability of Dharma

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In her presidential address at the American Political Science Association's annual meeting, Susanne Rudolph mentioned (2005):

Early in our research in India, Lloyd Rudolph and I coined the phrase "imperialism of categories." It was meant to designate the academic practice of imposing concepts on the other—the export of concepts as part of a hegemonic relationship. Categories crafted in a dominant socio-cultural environment are exported to a subordinate one. The imperialism of categories entails an unself-conscious parochialism of categories: scholars from a dominant culture, sometimes called the centre, travel to a distant and lesser place, sometimes called the periphery, where they apply "universal" concepts. The trouble is that the concepts have been fashioned out of the centre.... The East is fatalist, says Max Weber; the West agentic. The non-West conveys status by birth, says Talcott Parsons, the West, by achievement. The non-West is childlike, says John Stuart Mill; the West mature. Dominant peoples use ideal types and stereotypes to control the dominated by ranking and creating cultural social registers.

To avoid such "imperialism of categories" and following Gerald Larson (2004) and McKim Marriott (1990), I begin by noting that terms such as philosophy, religion, ethics, sustainability, and environmentalism are all, obviously, English terms and etymologically based on Greco-Roman intellectual heritage and Judeo-Christian religious heritage. All such ideas remain intertwined in much of the non-Western world, such as Asia and Africa. For instance, in all the texts in Indian history and contexts from contemporary communities in India, it can be a useless exercise to explore where philosophy ends and where religion begins or vice versa. In these descriptions

and prescriptions for thinking and living in the world, philosophy and religion overlap, and sustainability and environmentalism remain an undercurrent, adding a third layer to this combination of philosophy and religion.

Among the ancient religions of the world, Jainism and Buddhism are usually categorised as non-theistic religions. Here I try to explore how karma theory and virtues such as nonviolence guide Jains in their actions. Rather than investigating Dharma's "virtue ethics" for sustainability, we can begin by looking at the Jain way of life. This unique tradition brings to our attention such examples as some monks having renounced even their clothes. Similarly, most Jain lay people have been vegetarian for more than 2600 years, millennia before it became a trend in Euro-America. The last great teacher in the Jain tradition was Mahavira, the contemporary of the Buddha (living around 6th c. BCE). The combined influence of Buddhism and Jainism has profoundly shaped Indian society, most evidently in the practice of vegetarianism that millions of Indians continue to practice today in India and now across the world in the diaspora. While Buddhism also encourages nonviolence and vegetarianism, Jainism puts the ultimate emphasis on this ideal. It defines religion or philosophy as nonviolence with its great mantra, *Ahimsa Paramo Dharma*: "Nonviolence is the supreme virtue, ethic, and religion."

In America, nonviolence is most closely associated with Dr. Martin Luther King, who based his Civil Rights Movement on this principle. Dr. King and a few other African-American leaders visited the home of Gandhi in India and brought the Gandhian ideal of nonviolence to America (Lakshmi 2009). Gandhi, in turn, was influenced by Jainism. So, some scholars have referred to modern Jainism with the three M's who emphasised the principle of nonviolence: Mahavira (the last celebrated teacher contemporary of the Buddha), Mahatma (Gandhi), and

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Martin (Luther King) (Helton 2007; King 1999; Nojeim 2004). Thus, at least in two ways, Jainism's nonviolence remains relevant in the contemporary United States: the enduring influence of Dr. King's method of nonviolent resistance and increasing awareness for vegetarianism. In the last decade, there have been several reports from the United Nations<sup>1</sup> and other agencies connecting meat consumption with climate change, especially factory farming, which is now widely seen as one of the extreme examples of cruelty against animals and, in turn, towards our planet.

### **Influence of Jain Ethics on India's Sustainability and Environmental Issues**

Prima facie, one can be appalled by the large-scale destruction and pollution of India's natural resources. The assault on land is visible everywhere. The forest areas are under tremendous pressure, especially as villagers continue to look for their daily firewood and fodder in their natural environment. The problem of encroachment of such open areas is also a severe threat. Industrial pollution in India is akin to what happened to American cities such as Pittsburgh in the 1940s (Davidson 1979). For instance, one can also notice that unplanned urbanisation leads to waste disposal issues. There are several large-scale projects with significant impacts, such as large dams, which do not necessarily rehabilitate and relocate the displaced indigenous people from such sites. The pollution in Indian rivers can remind one of the American rivers, such as Ohio's Cuyahoga in the 1960s (Rotman 2010).

However, to present an alternative picture of India's environment, we can look at the Greendex survey conducted for several years by National Geographic between 2008 and 2014 (Greendex 2009). In these surveys, India consistently appears as the "greenest" country, greener than the United States and other Western countries, and greener than China and Brazil, other developing countries. The criterion that kept India greener than other countries is the national carbon footprint of Indians, which remains lower than their counterparts elsewhere, based on broad parameters such as consumption in terms of housing needs, transportation needs, food, and other consumer goods. In each of these four categories, many Indians continue to keep their carbon footprint lower than people elsewhere. This frugal lifestyle of Indians used to be critiqued by economists (sometimes disparagingly) by labelling it as the "Hindu rate of economic growth." These economists lamented that Indians consumed fewer natural resources than their counterparts elsewhere because of lower per capita income levels and the influence of philosophical and

cultural traditions such as Hinduism. Be that as it may, one can undoubtedly note that the dietary habits of many Indians were influenced more than 2000 years ago when the great leaders of Buddhism and Jainism, the Buddha and Mahavira, respectively, emphasised nonviolence towards animals as one of the supreme virtues. Over time, most Indians stopped sacrificing animals in their rituals, and today, they depend on rice, wheat, lentils, fruits, and vegetables for their staple diet (although some of them might choose a chicken-based meal occasionally). So, while economists critiqued the "Hindu rate of growth," environmentalists should celebrate the "Hindu-Jain way of life" that keeps India's carbon footprint lower than that of other countries. Presently, I will explore the rationale for Jain virtue ethics from the sustainability perspective.

The Jain cosmology divides all the beings in the universe into two categories, living (*Jiva*) and nonliving (*ajiva*) and space, into two categories, the living abode (*loka*) and nonliving abode (*Aloka*). In this cosmology, in addition to humans, animals, birds, insects, reptiles, and even earth, fire, air, and water are *Jiva*, i.e., with distinct and unique souls. The prominent nonliving beings, in addition to the medium of motion, medium of rest, time, and space, are the *karma* particles that pollute the souls of most of us because of the violence that we commit, intentionally or unintentionally, as we live in the world. Since the complete cessation of violence is impossible for any living being, out of one, two, three, four, and five-sensed beings, Jainism encouraged humans to consume only one-sensed beings (Chapple 2002, 128). These are earth, air, fire, water, and plants with only one sense of touch. Five-sensed beings include mammals (including humans) and birds<sup>2</sup>. Jainism's rationale for nonviolence equates humans with other mammals and birds, so for a human to kill any animal or bird would accrue the same karma as killing a fellow human being.

Further, for human living, even one-sensed beings such as earth, water, air, fire, and plants should be consumed with the utmost care. Among plants, vegetables such as carrots, radishes, onions, and garlic are discouraged because destroying a stem or root kills the entire plant. Similarly, only filtered water is to be consumed to avoid any violence to microbes in the water. Some Jain monks and nuns cover their mouths as they speak and breathe to prevent any harm to microbes in the air. Many devout Jains avoid eating after sunset to minimise the energy consumption from burning fossil fuels. Similarly, Jain monks and nuns avoid riding vehicles as well. Based on similar concerns for one-sensed beings, many Jains actively try to preserve wildlands, keep waterways and air unpolluted, and address climate change.

In addition to *Ahimsā* (nonviolence), *Aparigraha* (non-accumulation of goods) is the most important ideal

that has inspired Jain virtue ethics in its long history. Just as nonviolence finds its most clear application in vegetarianism, *Aparigraha* finds its application in the Jain insistence on minimising worldly possessions, as explained in the second book of one of the earliest Jain texts *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* (Dundas 2003:159). In an article for the *Washington Post* (December 14th, 2006), Diane Eck quoted Gandhi's words, "The earth has enough for one's need but not for one's greed." Gandhi practised what he preached by limiting his possessions and even his necessities.

Several Jains have also donated large sums of their hard-earned wealth to philanthropic causes such as education, healthcare, disaster relief, orphanages, and animal shelters, to name a few. Lay Jains have continued to support and revere their monks and nuns as their ultimate role models for *Aparigraha*. Indeed, some monks go to the extreme of renouncing every piece of cloth and utensils for eating their food. They walk entirely naked and eat a small meal with their bare hands because even collecting food or wearing clothes may turn into attachments and some violence towards natural resources. Such monks continue to inspire thousands of Jains to carry the ideal of *Aparigraha* in high esteem and a goal to achieve as they hope to progress in their spiritual journey. Nonviolence, non-accumulation, and non-possession, therefore, also serve as one of the high virtues for Jains for the sustainability of our planetary resources. These Jain virtues compare well with the conscientiousness that Vanderheiden discusses in his writings. Nonviolence and non-possession may require us to pay attention to our actions carefully and way of life – noticing minor impacts – in ways that might have some similarities (and, of course, some differences) to Vanderheiden's conscientiousness.

The third crucial Jain virtue, *Anekāntavāda*, means the doctrine of pluralism or "many pointedness" (Dundas 2003, 229). This virtue continues to inspire Jains to practice intellectual nonviolence by trying to keep an open mind towards different philosophical and religious traditions. The parable of an elephant and six blind men explains this virtue well. As these men touch different parts of the elephant, they equate the elephant with a snake (the man touching its tail), a wall (the man touching its belly), a spear (the man touching its tusk), and so on. However, the holistic definition of an elephant is possible only by combining all these partial definitions. *Anekāntavāda* similarly has inspired Jains to learn and preserve their rival ideologies of Hinduism and Buddhism for centuries. Because of this open mind, Jains did not hesitate to interact with Islamic emperors and even partially succeeded in occasionally making them adopt nonviolence as the state policy. The virtue of *Anekāntavāda* also applies to sustainability by

inspiring Jains to consider natural resources from non-anthropocentric perspectives. For instance, in India, many have observed that even the national highways are open for animals, unlike the American national highways, where humans are not allowed to "loiter." *Anekāntavāda* encourages us to accept even the animals' perspectives towards the highways, water, or other natural resources.

Jainism's *anekāntavāda* can help to achieve cooperation and sustainability. For example, as it requires thinking about the perspectives of others, it could be conducive to encouraging social sustainability and alliances for environmental sustainability. Nonviolence and pluralism might be very important for sustainability in terms of allowing diverse communities to tolerate and respect each other and to work together for sustainability. These Jain values might be beneficial in social movements for social and environmental sustainability.

### Jain Role Models and Their Inspiration for Virtue Ethics

As aforementioned, Mahavira (~600 BCE), the great hero, was the 24<sup>th</sup> and the last great teacher of Jainism and was a contemporary of the Buddha. Many of his statements and actions concerning compassion for trees and animals continue to inspire many Jains to be protectors of animals and nature in general, even today. For instance, one of the prominent Jain sacred texts, *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, records his statements such as "trees are inherently valuable" (2.4.2.11-12) and "vegetation has a life just as humans" (1.1.5.9-11). Just before Mahavira passed away, he sent one of his foremost disciples, Indrabhuti, to stop cattle slaughter.

In Jain cosmology, there are twenty-four such great teachers in every era. Before Mahavira, the 22<sup>nd</sup> teacher, Neminatha and the 23<sup>rd</sup> teacher, Parshvanatha, renounced their royal families and wealth after encountering violence against animals and reptiles, respectively. Other Jain sacred texts such as *Tattvārtha Sūtra* and *Bhavāni Sūtra* have statements such as, "The souls render service to one another." Another verse from *Dashavaikālika Sūtra* (1.2-5) highlights the behaviour of bees of collecting only minimal nectar from each flower instead of damaging or destroying the flower. Humans should also preserve their natural resources and consume them minimally for their existence. Another text, *Adipurāna*, states, "Forests are like saints, and Trees should be planted for positive karma."

Such examples and role models have continued to inspire Jain householders to get involved in less violent professions such as trading, banking, administrative activities, traditional medicine, arts and crafts, publishing, and education. According to an ancient Jain

text, *Bhogopabhog Vrata*, one would rarely, if ever, find a Jain householder involved in more violent professions such as trading of charcoal, alcohol, enslaved people, weapons, poisons, sugar canes, firearms, or timber. Jains have stayed away from exploiting animals or constructing lakes, as such activities also involve causing great violence to the environment.

### Gandhi and Jain Virtue for Sustainability

Mahatma Gandhi remains the most prominent role model who practised and preached the virtue ethics of sustainability based on Jainism (and other philosophical traditions). Vinay Lal (2000) describes Gandhi as “too deep” even for deep ecology. According to Lal, by leading a virtuous life, Gandhi is a role model of environmentalism that goes far beyond what “deep ecology” advocates. Although Gandhi left for South Africa in 1891, he continued to correspond with a Jain guru, Shrimad Rajchandra, for several years. He adopted several ideas in his movement against the British colonial and racist policies against Indians in South Africa and later in India. Some of these virtues were the truth (*Satya*), nonviolence (*Ahimsa*), non-accumulation (*Aparigraha*), celibacy (*Brahmacharya*), self-reliance (*Purushartha*), and fasting (*Upavasa*). Gandhi’s life emerged as an ecological treatise, a living ecosystem manifested by his lifelong practices such as his small meals of nuts and fruits, daily ablutions and bodily practices, periodic observances of silence, morning walks, spinning wheel, and waste avoidance. Today, many moralists, nonviolent activists, feminists, journalists, social reformers, trade union leaders, peasants, prohibitionists, nature-cure lovers, renouncers, and environmentalists continue to be inspired by Gandhi’s life.

Long before Gandhi, emperor Aśoka erected dozens of edicts across India to proclaim nonviolence in his empire by maintaining sacred groves and prohibiting hunting and violence (Dhammika 1993). Although Aśoka adopted Buddhism, his grandfather Chandragupta Maurya (Britannica 2009) and grandson Samprati (Dundas 2003, 115) had adopted Jainism, according to Jainism’s historical sources. Similarly, an emperor in Gujarat, Siddharaja, and his successor, Kumarapala, promoted Jainism and nonviolence in the medieval period in Indian history. Islamic emperors such as Muhammad Tughluq, Akbar, and Jahangir also periodically prohibited hunting and meat consumption for some special days under the influence of Jain monks who visited their courts.

### Social Action and Sustainability Today

As Flugel (2005) notes, Jains have been active in their

social activism in their long history. Recent prominent Jain leaders and spokespersons demonstrate the Jain adherence to nonviolence, such as the late Jain monks Sushil Muni and Acharya Tulsi, who opposed geopolitical conflicts, terrorism, and other socio-political violence. As Cort (2002) notes, hundreds of thousands of Jains perform a ritual called *Pratikraman* every day in which they ask for forgiveness from 8.4 million species<sup>3</sup>, including all the one-sensed, two-sensed, three-sensed, four-sensed, and five-sensed beings, for any intentional or unintentional violence committed in action, speech, or thought. If understood sincerely, this ritual can help remind and transform some of those Jains involved in industries that are polluting and damaging to local natural resources. Many Jains support and fund hundreds of shelters and hospitals for animals and birds across India and North America (Lodrick 1981). The Bird Hospital in New Delhi remains among the most celebrated efforts (Andersen 2019). Since its establishment in 1956, Jains have continued supporting and managing this avian veterinary hospital that treats thousands of sick and injured birds yearly.

Khichan, a small village in the desert of the Indian state Rajasthan, has similarly caught the attention of several birdwatchers as the local Jains there welcome and feed thousands of Demoiselle Cranes that visit this village from across Asia. Another example is from Goa in India, where the largest wildlife sanctuary was named after Mahavira, the last great teacher of Jainism, and the local Jains there contributed a large sum of money to this cause (Jain 2011). Jains continue to promote vegetarianism and push for a ban on meat consumption across the world. According to several recent news reports, many Jain temples such as those in Byculla, Dahanu, Nashik, Shahpur (Maharashtra, India), Dilwara (Rajasthan, India), Kolaththur (Tamil Nadu, India), Bareilly (Uttar Pradesh, India), Franklin (New Jersey, USA), and Milpitas (California, USA) have adopted solar energy to reduce their carbon footprint. Other Jain temples, such as those in Detroit, Michigan, and Dallas, Texas, have also taken other green measures to reflect the virtue of nonviolence towards nature. Other Indian Jain temples, such as Shatrunjaya Temple in Palitana, India, and Veerayatan, Bihar, have initiated reforestation in their surroundings. The Jain Center of Southern California holds ongoing events in support of animal rights. The Detroit Jain Temple works with the Sasha Farm, the Midwest’s most significant animal sanctuary, housing over two hundred rescued and aged animals near Ann Arbor, Michigan. Other American Jains are active in the Vegetarian Society of the District of Columbia and with another cattle sanctuary managed by the Voith Family of Angelica, New York (Valley 2002).

One of the most prominent examples of animal shelters is *Shree Sumati Jeev Raksha Kendra* in Rajasthan, India<sup>4</sup>. A

leading Jain group and other Jain donors manage this cattle sanctuary<sup>5</sup>. Its campus is over 7 million square feet and includes a Jain temple. This centre started in 1998 with around one hundred cattle and now houses more than six thousand animals that are cared for by 175 employees. Unlike North American cattle farms that are slaughtered for human consumption, the cattle at this centre are managed according to Jain principles of feeding them only vegetarian food. These cattle are maintained in a sacred environment where Jain chants continuously play on loudspeakers. The centre runs on biogas produced here using cow dung from the cattle at this centre. The water needs of the centre are fulfilled by rainwater harvesting at the centre itself. Food for the animals is locally grown, and the milk from the cows is fed to their calves. The centre also supports and feeds local birds and stray dogs. The centre has also planted more than 100,000 trees in its vicinity, including some of the sacred trees of the Jain tradition.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars and practitioners need to study these phenomena in Jainism that have now become global in scope. For example, the contemporary Jain leaders who are taking the values of Jainism to the new frontier of veganism. Although most Jain ascetics are vegetarians, we now have several activists and mendicants who embrace nonviolence at an even deeper level through veganism. Pradeep Shah, Founder of Nature's Law and Diet System<sup>7</sup> in Mumbai, is one of many prominent Jain activists organising talks by Jain ascetics on veganism. Jain ascetics such as Labdhi Sagar, Vaibhav Shree<sup>8</sup>, Viharsh Sagar, Aryika Chaitanyamati<sup>9</sup>, and Dev Nandi are spearheading the vegan movement inspired by the Jain principle of nonviolence. Some active websites, such as VeganJains.com and JainVegans.org, promote veganism among Jains and others. Several UK-based Jain groups are turning vegan. USA-born Jains frequently organise vegan panels at JAINA conventions and their local temples. For a glimpse of such efforts, my translation of the Gujarati discourse by Labdhi Sagar in Mumbai is below. Some claims made by him may be extreme, as I am sharing my verbatim translation from an excerpt of his recorded lecture on August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017:

"Today, we treat cattle like raw materials and exploit and torture them to the extreme for maximum output. In Jainism, we are forbidden to take anything from other beings without their consent. Our gurus advise us against such actions, and we accumulate much negative karma if we continue. Such actions will lead to premature death in the next lives, as explained by the Jain principle of karma, action, and consequence. Even the government does not share the exact statistics about the number of animals used in the dairy and meat industry. However, according to the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), 75% of Indian milk is contaminated with chemicals

such as Urea, caustic soda, paints, detergent powder, sodium chloride, and shampoo. We should consume milk in minimal quantity, and the milk must be obtained from the cattle treated like family."

## Conclusion

The edited book *Jainism and Ecology: Nonviolence in the Web of Life* (2002) was the first significant attempt in the Western hemisphere to study Jainism from an environmental perspective. However, most of the epistemological and hermeneutic methodologies applied by scholars, such as Cort, on non-Western traditions such as Jainism are rooted in the Western categories. The Western categories must be broadened by incorporating Indic terms in English, such as Prakriti, Jiva, and ahimsa. Western scholarship must also look at the living laboratories of the ecological, sustainable sensibilities in lives such as that of Gandhi, lives that defy all neat categories of being an environmentalist, a philosopher or an activist. The nonviolence-based inspiration from Mahavir (Swami) to Mahatma (Gandhi) has continued to Martin (Luther King) and several other contemporary leaders such as Sunderlal Bahuguna and Nelson Mandela, and it is high time that scholars of religion and ecology embrace this *Ahimsak Ecology* and not just Deep Ecology. Although no religion can claim to have anticipated our current environmental situation, contemporary Jain vegans are inspired by Jainism's nonviolence. They can be seen as a unique response to the ongoing sustainability crisis.

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## Notes

1. <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/197623/icode/>
2. According to Jainism, two-sensed beings are worms, leeches, oysters, and snails with lifespan of 12 years, three-sensed beings are insects and spiders with lifespan of 49 days, and four-sensed beings are butterflies, flies, and bees with lifespan of six months.
3. Although the total number of species according to the latest scientific research is approximately 8.7 million ( $\pm 1.3$  million) according to Mora et al (2011), the number of species in all the ancient Indian texts is mentioned to be 8.4 million. If biologists tell us that there are over 10 million species, presumably Jains would respect and seek forgiveness from all of them.

4. <http://www.pavapuri.com/#animals>, accessed on March 20, 2019.
5. <https://www.jaina.org/page/JivDaya> in 2017, North American Jains donated around \$50,000 to such animal shelters across India and in North America, accessed on March 20, 2019.
6. In my 2011 article, I explore several such cattle sanctuaries across India.
7. [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuVwIzDOODc\\_vU8EkmfWwYw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuVwIzDOODc_vU8EkmfWwYw) (accessed May 17, 2019)
8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLYitfLJ6vk> (accessed May 17, 2019)
9. [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=10156108359347120&id=545827119](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10156108359347120&id=545827119) (accessed June 17, 2019)

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