

THE JAIN DECLARATION ON NATURE

Author - Dr. L. M. Singhvi

The Jain tradition which enthroned the philosophy of ecological harmony and non-violence as its lodestar flourished for centuries side-by-side with other schools of thought in ancient India. It formed a vital part of the mainstream of ancient Indian life, contributing greatly to its philosophical, artistic and political heritage. During certain periods of Indian history, many ruling elites as well as large sections of the population were Jains, followers of the Jinas (Spiritual Victors).

The ecological philosophy of Jainism which flows from its spiritual quest has always been central to its ethics, aesthetics, art, literature, economics and politics. It is represented in all its glory by the 24 Jinas or Tirthankaras (Path-finders) of this era whose example and teachings have been its living legacy through the millenia.

Although the ten million Jains estimated to live in modern India constitute a tiny fraction of its population, the message and motifs of the Jain perspective, its reverence for life in all forms, its commitment to the progress of human civilization and to the preservation of the natural environment continues to have a profound and pervasive influence on Indian life and outlook.

In the twentieth century, the most vibrant and illustrious example of Jain influence was that of Mahatma Gandhi, acclaimed as the Father of the Nation. Gandhi's friend, Shrimad Rajchandra, was a Jain. The two great men corresponded, until Rajchandra's death, on issues of faith and ethics. The central Jain teaching of ahimsa (non-violence) was the guiding principle of Gandhi's civil disobedience in the cause of freedom and social equality. His ecological philosophy found apt expression in his observation that the greatest work of humanity could not match the smallest wonder of nature.

THE JAIN TEACHINGS

1. Ahimsa (non-violence)

The Jain ecological philosophy is virtually synonymous with the principle of ahimsa (non-violence) which runs through the Jain tradition like a golden thread.

“Ahimsa parmo dharmah” (Non-violence is the supreme religion).

Mahavira, the 24th and last Tirthankara (Path-finder) of this era, who lived 2500 years ago in north India, consolidated the basic Jain teachings of peace, harmony and renunciation, taught two centuries earlier by the Tirthankara Parshva, and for thousands of years previously by the 22 other Tirthankaras of this era, beginning with Adinatha Rishabha. Mahavira threw new light on the perennial quest of the soul with the truth and discipline of ahimsa. He said:

“There is nothing so small and subtle as the atom nor any element so vast as space. Similarly,

there is no quality of soul more subtle than non-violence and no virtue of spirit greater than reverence for life.”

Ahimsa is a principle that Jains teach and practice not only towards human beings but towards all nature. It is an unequivocal teaching that is at once ancient and contemporary.

The scriptures tell us:

“All the Arhats (Venerable Ones) of the past, present and future discourse, counsel, proclaim, propound and prescribe thus in unison:

Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture or kill any creature or living being.”

In this 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 ahimsa refers not only to wars and visible physical acts of violence but 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. Ancient Jain texts explain that violence (Ahimsa) is not defined by actual harm, for this may be unintentional. It is the intention to harm, the absence of compassion, that makes action violent. Without violent thought there could be no violent actions. When violence enters our thoughts, we remember Tirthankara Mahavira’s words:

“You are that which you intend to hit, injure, insult, torment, persecute, torture, enslave or kill.”

2. Parasparopagraho jivanam (interdependence)

Mahavira 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 entwined with them”

Jain cosmology recognizes the fundamental natural phenomenon of symbiosis or mutual dependence, which forms the basis of the modern day science of ecology. It is relevant to recall that the term ‘ecology’ was coined in the latter half of the nineteenth century from the Greek word oikos, meaning ‘home’, a place to which one returns. Ecology is the branch of biology which deals with the relations of organisms to their surroundings and to other organisms.

The ancient Jain scriptural aphorism Parasparopagraho jivanam (All life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence) is refreshingly contemporary in its premise and perspective. It defines the scope of modern ecology while extending it further to a more spacious ‘home’. It means that all aspects of nature belong together and are bound in a physical as well as a metaphysical relationship. Life is viewed as a gift of togetherness, accommodation and assistance in a universe teeming with interdependent constituents.

3. Anekantavada (the doctrine of manifold aspects)

The concept of universal interdependence underpins the Jain theory of knowledge, known as

anekantava or the doctrine of manifold aspects. Anekantavada describes the world as a multifaceted, everchanging reality with an infinity of viewpoints depending on the time, place, nature and state of the one who is the viewer and that which is viewed.

This leads to the doctrine of syadvada or relativity, which states that truth is relative to different viewpoints (nayas). What is true from one point of view is open to question from another. 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.

Because it is rooted in the doctrines of anekantavada and syadvada, Jainism does not look upon the universe from an anthropocentric, ethnocentric or egocentric viewpoint. It takes into account the viewpoints of other species, other communities and nations and other human beings.

4. Samyaktva (equanimity)

The discipline of non-violence, the recognition of universal interdependence and the logic of the doctrine of manifold aspects, leads inexorably to the avoidance of dogmatic, intolerant, inflexible, aggressive, harmful and unilateral attitudes towards the world around. It inspires the personal quest of every Jain for samyaktva (equanimity) towards both jiva (animate beings) and ajiva (inanimate substances and objects). 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 of the balance of the universe.

5. Jiva-daya (compassion, empathy and charity)

Although the term `ahimsa' is stated in the negative (a=non, himsa=violence), it is rooted in a host of positive aims and actions which have great relevance to contemporary environmental concerns.

Ahimsa is an aspect of daya (compassion, empathy and charity), described by a 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."

Jiva-daya means caring for and sharing with all living beings, tending, protecting and serving them. It entails universal friendliness (maitri), universal forgiveness (kshama) and universal fearlessness (abhaya).

Jains, whether monks, nuns or householders, therefore, affirm prayerfully and sincerely, that their heart is filled with forgiveness for all living beings and that they have sought and received the forgiveness of all beings, that they crave the friendship of all beings, that all beings give them their friendship and that there is not the slightest feeling of alienation or enmity in their heart for anyone or anything. They also pray that forgiveness and friendliness may reign throughout the world and that all living beings may cherish each other.

JAIN COSMOLOGY

Jains do not acknowledge an intelligent first cause as the creator of the universe. The Jain theory is that the universe has no beginning or end. It is traced to jiva and ajiva, the two everlasting, uncreated, independent and coexisting categories. Consciousness is jiva. That which has no consciousness is ajiva.

There are five substances of ajiva:

Dharma - the medium of motion
Adharma - the medium of rest
Akasha - space
Pudgala - matter
Kala - time

Pudgala (matter) has form and consists of individual atoms (paramanu) and conglomerates of atoms (skandha) which can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted and/or touched. According to Jains, energy, or the phenomena of sound, darkness, shade, heat, light and the like, is produced by conglomerates of atoms.

The jiva (soul) has no form but, during its worldly career, it is vested with a body and becomes subject to an inflow of karmic `dust' (asravas). These are the subtle material particles that are drawn to a soul because of its worldly activities. The asravas bind the soul to the physical world until they have brought about the karmic result when they fall away `like ripe fruit' by which time other actions have drawn more asravas to the soul.

With the exception of the Arihantas (the Ever-Perfect) and the Siddhas (the Liberated), who have dispelled the passions which provide the `glue' for the asravas, all souls are in karmic bondage to the universe. They go through a continuous cycle of death and rebirth in a personal evolution that can lead at last to moksha (eternal release). In this cycle there are countless souls at different stages of their personal evolution; earth-bodies, water-bodies, fire-bodies, air-bodies, vegetable-bodies, and mobile bodies ranging from bacteria, insects, worms, birds and larger animals to human beings, infernal beings and celestial beings.

The Jain evolutionary theory is based on a grading of the physical bodies containing souls according to the degree of sensory perception. All souls are equal but are bound by varying amounts of asravas (karmic particles) which is reflected in the type of body they inhabit. The lowest form of physical body has only the sense of touch. Trees and vegetation have the sense of touch and are therefore able to experience pleasure and pain, and have souls. Mahavira taught that only the one who understood the grave demerit and detriment caused by destruction of plants and trees understood the meaning and merit of reverence for nature. Even metals and stones might have life in them and should not be dealt with recklessly.

Above the single-sense jivas are micro-organisms and small animals with two, three or four senses. Higher in the order are the jivas with five senses. The highest grade of animals and human beings also possess rationality and intuition (manas). As a highly evolved form of life, human beings have a great moral responsibility in their mutual dealings and in their relationship with the rest of the universe.

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.

THE JAIN CODE OF CONDUCT

1. The five vratas (vows)

The five vratas (vows) in the Jain code of conduct are:

Non-violence in thought, word and deed,

To seek and speak the truth,

To behave honestly and never to take anything by force or theft,

To practise restraint and chastity in thought, word and deed,

To practice non-acquisitiveness.

The vow of ahimsa is the first and pivotal vow. The other vows may be viewed as aspects of ahimsa which together form an integrated code of conduct in the individual's quest for equanimity and the three jewels (ratna-traya) of right faith, right knowledge and right conduct.

The vows are undertaken at an austere and exacting level by the monks and nuns and are then called maha-vratas (great vows). They are undertaken at a more moderate and flexible level by householders and called the anu-vratas ('atomic' or basic vows).

Underlying the Jain code of conduct is the emphatic assertion of individual responsibility towards one and all. Indeed, the entire universe is the forum of one's own conscience. The code is profoundly ecological in its secular thrust and its practical consequences.

2. Kindness to animals

The transgressions against the vow of non-violence include all forms of cruelty to animals and human beings. Many centuries ago, Jains condemned as evil the common practice of animal sacrifice to the gods. It is generally forbidden to keep animals in captivity, to whip, mutilate or overload them or to deprive them of adequate food and drink. The injunction is modified in respect of domestic animals to the extent that they may be roped or even whipped occasionally but always mercifully with due consideration and without anger.

3. Vegetarianism

Except for allowing themselves a judicious use of one-sensed

life in the form of vegetables, Jains would not consciously take any life for food or sport. As a community they are strict vegetarians, consuming neither meat, fish nor eggs. They confine themselves to vegetable and milk products

4. Self-restraint and the avoidance of waste

By taking the basic vows, the Jain laity endeavor to live a life of moderation and restraint and to practice a measure of abstinence and austerity. They must not procreate indiscriminately lest they overburden the universe and its resources. Regular periods of fasting for self-purification are encouraged.

In their use of the earth's resources Jains take their cue from "the bee [that] sucks honey in the blossoms of a tree without hurting the blossom and strengthens itself". Wants should be reduced, desires curbed and consumption levels kept within reasonable limits. Using any resource beyond one's needs and misuse of any part of nature is considered a form of theft. Indeed, the Jain faith goes one radical step further and declares unequivocally that waste and creating pollution are acts of violence.

5. Charity

Accumulation of possessions and enjoyment for personal ends should be minimized. Giving charitable donations and one's time for community projects generously is a part of a Jain householder's obligations. That explains why the Jain temples and pilgrimage centers are well-endowed and well-managed. It is this sense of social obligation born out of religious teachings that has led the Jains to found and maintain innumerable schools, colleges, hospitals, clinics, lodging houses, hostels, orphanages, relief and rehabilitation camps for the handicapped, old, sick and disadvantaged as well as hospitals for ailing birds and animals. Wealthy individuals are advised to recognize that beyond a certain point their wealth is superfluous to their needs and that they should manage the surplus as trustees for social benefit.

The five fundamental teachings of Jainism and the five-fold Jain code of conduct outlined in this Declaration are deeply rooted in its living ethos in unbroken continuity across the centuries. They offer the world today a time-tested anchor of moral imperatives and a viable route plan for humanity's common pilgrimage for holistic environmental protection, peace and harmony in the universe.