

ESSAY

Environmentalism for the Post-Pandemic World: Lessons from Jainism and Jain Monks

Bhumi Shah¹

ABSTRACT

Jainism, which originated in India, is one of the oldest living ancient religions of the world. Jainism teaches that the way to liberation and bliss is to conduct lives of harmlessness and renunciation. The essence of Jainism is concern for the welfare of every being in the universe and for the health of the universe itself. Jains believe that animals, plants as well as human beings contain living souls. Each of these souls is considered of equal value and should be treated with respect and compassion. Jain monks, who are strict vegetarians, and Jain followers are protectors of the environment in the true sense as their way of living minimizes harm done to the environment. This essay discusses how some fundamental Jain teachings are conducive to promoting environmental wellbeing and flourishing. It also examines how the lives of Jain monks per personal interviews demonstrate a way of life that is in harmony with nature and can inspire others to live their own lives in such a way that would cause less unnecessary harm to others, even the smallest creatures.

Keywords: *Jainism, environmental protection, non-violence, ecological crisis*

1. Introduction

Jainism, which began somewhere near sixth century BCE in India, is one of the oldest living ancient religions of the world. The term Jain means the devotee of Jinas (Spiritual Victors), individuals

¹ Bhumi Shah is a researcher, anchor, and interviewer. She is pursuing a doctorate degree in Mass Communication and Journalism at Gujarat University, Ahmadabad, India. She can be reached at shah.bhumi16@gmail.com.

who have won victory over passions of attachment and aversion that defile the soul, and therefore, attains omniscience and supreme bliss. Jinas, as enlightened human teachers, are also called *Thirthankaras* (Ford-makers) whose words and teachings help living beings to cross the ocean of misery or transmigratory existence (Shah 2015). Jains believe in reincarnation and seek to attain ultimate liberation, which means escaping the continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth so that the immortal soul lives forever in a state of bliss. Liberation is achieved by eliminating all karma from the soul. As a religion that emphasizes self-help, Jains do not believe in gods or spiritual beings that will help human beings. They live in accordance with the three guiding principles known as the ‘three jewels,’ consisting of right belief, right knowledge, and right conduct. The supreme principle of Jain living is non-violence (*ahimsa*), which constitutes one of the five *mahavratas* (the five great vows). The other *mahavratas* are non-attachment to possessions, not lying, not stealing, and sexual restraint (with celibacy as the ideal). Mahavira is regarded as the man who gave Jainism its present-day form.

As Jainism teaches that the way to liberation and bliss is to conduct lives of harmlessness and renunciation, the essence of Jainism is concern for the welfare of every being in the universe and for the health of the universe itself. Jains believe that all beings – humans, animals as well as plants – contain living souls that possess equal value and should be treated with respect and compassion. Jains are strict vegetarians and live in a way that minimises their use of the world’s resources. Thus, Jainism is fundamentally a religion of the ecology and has turned the ecology into a religion. This outlook has enabled Jains to create an environmentally friendly value system and code of conduct. Because of the insistence on rationality in the Jain tradition, Jains are always ready and willing to look positively and with enthusiasm upon environmental causes. In India and abroad, they are in the forefront of bringing greater awareness and putting into practice their cardinal principles on ecology. Their programs have been modest and mostly self-funded through volunteers (Finlay 2003).

This essay presents the Jain outlook on the ecology and how Jain teachings could greatly contribute to the effort to promote ecological wellbeing in the post-pandemic world. This essay approaches the

topic by examining the environmentally relevant teachings as well as the examples modelled by Jain monks (both male and female) in the Svetambara School, one of the two main schools of Jainism.

2. Jain Environmental Outlook

According to the *Tattvartha Sutra* there are 8,400,000 species of living things – each of which is part of the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth, and is therefore precious. This central teaching of Jainism was made famous in recent times by Mahatma Gandhi who was greatly influenced by Jain ideas and who made *ahimsa* the guiding principle of his struggle for social freedom and equality in India. The notion of *ahimsa* not only refers to the act of not hurting others but also the intention to not cause physical, mental or spiritual harm to any part of nature. According to Mahavira, “You are that which you wish to harm.” This represents the positive aspect of non-violence – to demonstrate an attitude of compassion towards all life. Jains pray that forgiveness and friendliness may reign throughout the world and that all living beings may cherish each other. This ancient Jain principle teaches that all of nature is bound together, and says that if one does not care for nature, one does not care for oneself. Another important Jain principle is not to waste the gifts of nature, and even to reduce one’s needs as far as possible. As Gandhi said, “There is enough in this world for human needs, but not for human wants” (Jain Ecology 2022). Chandaria (2008) writes:

Lord Mahavira preached about the environment in the first book of ‘Acharanga Sutra’, which is accepted, as His direct words. The elements of nature were described as living beings and under the fundamental principle of AHIMSA these were to be protected in all ways – no waste, no overuse, no abuse, no polluting. If we follow these principles, then we would stop destroying our environment as well as preserve the resources that are available for all to share. If there are more resources available for all, then the poor will also get a fair share thereof.

Therefore, Jainism aims for the welfare of all living beings and not of humans alone. Jainism maintains that living beings are infinite

and are present everywhere, even in empty space. The Jain dictum *parasparopagraho jivanam* (living beings render service to one another) offers an endearing alternative to the Darwin theory of ‘survival of the fittest.’ Instead of engaging in unceasing competition, the life of a living being is ideally a life of mutual cooperation and assistance. “All humanity is one,” is one of the fundamental teachings that Jainism offers (Desai 2008).

Because of this Jain outlook on life, social service constitutes a prominent aspect of Jain ethics. It prescribes six daily duties for every lay person or householder, viz. Jina (deity) adoration, Sadhu (mendicant) veneration, study of Jain literature and scriptures, practice of self-discipline, observance of fasts and the curbing of appetites, and giving of charity. Jain ethics, which ultimately are directed towards the liberation of individual human beings, is a blend of *Achar* (conduct) and *Vichar* (reflection) (*Ibid.*). A Jain Sadhu (mendicant), in order to acquire the rightful status, has to study Jain scriptures and scriptures of other religions also. By and large, Jainism is considered a progressive religion with adherents spread across the globe.

It can be asserted that environmental protection is intrinsic to Jainism because concern for environmental wellbeing is in-built and integrated into every principle, tenet and fundamental doctrine of Jainism, as well as in its epistemology, ontology, and metaphysical concepts. Enlightened Jain icons, Arhats, Tirthankaras, learned saints, and Acharyas pondered over and considered every aspect of the environment including causes of its degradation, necessary preventative measures, as well as remedial actions to address and rectify environmental harm. These religious figures developed and prescribed principles and codes of conduct to ensure a sustained, healthy, and symbiotically harmonious environment. The Jain notion about the environment is much wider than generally understood. The environment in the Jain worldview implies not only the physical environment consisting of air, water, soil, and animals, etc. but also the social environment of multitudinous relationships between individual human beings, families, groups, societies, and nations. Moreover, the environment includes interdependent interactions between all life forms that also interact with physical constituents. Both the physical environment and the social

environment are interactive, mutually reinforcing and influencing to mould and condition each other (S.M. Jain 2012).

3. Jain Principle of Non-Violence for Environmental Protection

Since the last two hundred years, intense industrialization and human population growth have resulted in an ecological imbalance. This, in turn, affects the wellbeing and flourishing of human beings and other living beings as seen in the continual extinction of animal and plants species each day. Jainism has been described as ecological religion or religious ecology. The three principles of Jainism that support this assertion include *ahimsa* (non-violence), *aparigraha* (non-attachment), and *anekantvada* (non-absolutism). Among these three, there is no exaggeration to say that the Jain ecological philosophy is virtually synonymous with the principle of non-violence which runs through the Jain tradition like a golden thread. It is a concept which is at once ancient and refreshingly modern. Along with these other two principles, non-violence helps Jainism to be able to offer a sound environmental ethic which can ensure sustainability. This ethics is integrally connected with an enlightened spirituality about the nature of the world and the human relationship with other entities in the universe. Jain spirituality is one that does not “permit us to exploit nature for our self-chosen purposes” (Aparigraha 1998).

The Jain worldview has implications for the emergence of a non-violent culture necessary for environmental preservation. Non-violence or ‘harmlessness,’ though not unique to Jainism, is the first and foremost tenet of this tradition. It is also an essential precondition for environmental protection. Jainism is perhaps the only religion to allow this tenet to permeate every aspect of its teachings and practices, turning violence into a moral duty to prevent causing harm to beings that are already suffering. 2,500 years ago, Lord Mahavira affirmed, “There is nothing in this world higher than Mount Meru or anything more expansive than the sky. Likewise know that no religion is greater than non-violence” (Bhavpahud 91).

Recently, I carried out a series of interviews with Jain monks in the city of Ahmedabad in order to gauge their ideas on environmental

protection. Ahmedabad is one of the largest business centres of India and has a sizable presence of Jains within the religiously diverse city. The main objective of the interview was to: (1) Understand changes adapted by Jain monks in their day-to-day lives during pandemic times; and (2) Understand the beliefs of Jain monks about environmental protection and how they view the pandemic from an ecological perspective. My interviews were conducted with a total of 10 ascetics (6 males and 4 females) in two separate sub-sects of the Svetambara School. As we know, there are different schools, sects, and sub-sects within the Jain tradition. However, the scope of this essay does not allow for detailed descriptions of these various groups.

From my interview with the ten male and female monks, I was able to draw some salient points that pertain to the contemporary ecological crisis. The sentiments expressed by the Jain monks also convincingly demonstrate how their way of life are truly conducive to promoting environmental wellbeing and balance. Following are some important points:

- *The monks organize their lives in a way that is in touch with nature.* They build their daily activities in accordance with the natural cycle. Therefore, they always wake up before sunrise in order to perform meditation to prepare themselves for the day. The Jain monks also schedule their dinner time for after sunset. While monks do travel about, they do not travel during the monsoon season when many living creatures surface to the ground due to the rain. Thus, the lives of the Jain monks are closely tuned to the processes in nature. Many environmentalists have pointed out that humanity's estrangement from nature has been a significant contributing factor in causing the ecological crisis. The monks' lives which are greatly in harmony with nature has the opposite effect.
- *The lives of the monks are characterized by environmentally friendly virtues such as moderation, detachment, and responsibility.* The monks interviewed said that they never use electricity or technological gadgets such as a mobile phone, and use minimal water for bathing and washing clothes, which are all white. While

the monks in the Svetambara School, unlike their counterpart in the Digambara School, are allowed to wear clothes, each monk is only allotted five sets of clothes that can only be replaced when the old ones are torn. As vehicles are never used, Jain monks walk when traveling about for their activities, such as entering houses of adherents asking for food, and even when traveling from city to city. By not using modern transportation, they reduce greatly the amount of resources that they consume and the ecological footprint that they produce. Jain monks eat whatever is given them and do not let the food go to waste. Even the small amount of water that the monks use to clean their eating utensils are consumed afterward. When facing illness, the monks resort to Ayurvedic medicine instead of allopathy medicine because they feel that the latter method of making medicine is not environmentally friendly as animals are involved in experimentation before being used by humans. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the monks became infected with the virus, they also only made use of the natural medicine.

- *Jain monks demonstrate a great amount of respect for natural entities.* As part of their daily routines, the monks perform the *pratikaman* meditation, in which they seek forgiveness for the bad actions in their daily activities, especially those that bring harm to others, even the smallest living creature, through their words, thoughts, or actions. This practice is consistent with the Jain doctrine of non-violence or harmlessness, which demonstrates the utmost respect for life. While it is true that it is impossible to eliminate all violence from one's life because even the act of breathing or drinking water can cause harm to various bacteria in the air or in the water, the essential thing is the effort to avoid all unnecessary violence. The Jain monks exemplify a way of life that avoids unnecessary harm to others, a complete opposite from the consumerist mentality of contemporary society which has caused the ecological imbalance and degradation being witnessed today.
- *Jain monks in my interview believed that the COVID-19 pandemic is evidence of the negative karma created by human's destructive acts towards nature.* The balance of nature is disturbed due to the

enormous amount of pollution, excessive use of chemicals, over-extraction of natural resources, and wasteful use of water and other resources. The development of science, instead of helping human beings to live more harmoniously with nature, in reality, has caused disturbance to ecological systems. While many believe that science has made people's lives easier, the fact is science has weakened the human power and deprived today's generation of peace of mind. The pandemic warns humanity of the errors of their ways and the need to protect the environment in order to avoid natural disasters and future pandemics. These phenomena serve to remind humanity of the enormous toll towards themselves and others that can take place when they are not responsible in their actions.

4. Conclusion

Jainism advocates the values of non-violence as a life-style discipline, which is also the core of any environmental ethic. Non-violence is not a ritual or an abstract concept in Jainism but a way of life to be lived out all the time. The COVID-19 pandemic that has been wreaking havoc globally since late 2019 should not be blamed on the coronavirus but should be considered as a symptom of human failings that allow for the virus to appear. From the Jain perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic could be an opportunity for humanity to pause to examine its actions that cause harm to themselves and others. In this essay, I have showed how the Jain notion of non-violence as exemplified by the lives of the monks interviewed can inspire the world to re-evaluate its own outlook and habits that are impacting the environment. While it is not possible for everyone to live as the Jain monks do, what can be taken from the Jain teaching and the lives of the monks is the desire to not cause harm and the effort to minimize violence the best way possible. Indeed, if individuals and communities make this effort, the ecological crisis today can be significantly rectified.

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