

## The Jain Principle of *Ahimsa* (Nonviolence) and Ecology

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### **Crumbling Ecosystem and Humanity**

**T**HOUGH *ahimsa*, the basic tenet of Jainism, has been in vogue since the Age of Lord Rsabhadeva, the first Jain Tirthankara (Jina or pathfinder) of this cycle of time, who it is believed, was born thousands of years ago, it shot into prominence with the advent of Gandhi in the twentieth century who used it successfully as a weapon to compel the Britishers to quit India and give her freedom ultimately.

The crumbling ecosystem of the planet earth and its rapid environmental degradation have once again attracted the attention of the concerned citizens all over the world recently towards the nonviolent Jain tradition and its principle of *ahimsa*. I would define, analyze and elucidate the Jain principle of *ahimsa* vis-a-vis the present crisis that threatens the extinction of life in the foregoing paragraphs, but it will be in fitness of things if I first give my own perception and assessment of the precarious situation precipitated by man's callous attitude and cruelty towards nature and his unrestrained lifestyle rooted in sheer pomposity, ugly exhibitionism and in his desire to monopolize all resources of the planet and use them for amassing wealth and make his life most comfortable. This human tendency is responsible for this unprecedented scientific, industrial and technological advancement which may have brought prosperity to a few people but have pushed billions of people to near starvation and abject conditions following the destruction of nature which sustains all life forms. It has also resulted in the wiping out of many species vitally important for human survival.

The biologically diverse forms of life on this planet are exposed to the risk of annihilation. All life-forms are interdependent and interconnected. Lord Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara of the Jain tradition stated two thousand five hundred years ago 'parasparopagraha jivanam'—all life is bound together by mutual cooperation and support. But man who

is the most intelligent creature among all the species has exceeded his limits to the disadvantage of animals, birds, forests, mountains and streams.

Civilizations evolved in similar technological stages do seek to improve well-being, they often bring an illusory sense of power and separation from nature and erode basic values that encoded sustainable practice. Moreover, the oldest styles of human culture are still with us like nomadic pastoralist and peasant farmer who persist alongside the megacities of modern life. Though great civilizations have repeatedly failed, these simple technologies survive. 'Only' when war, famine and environmental collapse strike, do we understand, too late, our dependence on nature and on peace—the ecological imperative. According to James Lovelock, the celebrated scientist who thinks that planet earth is gravely ill regards the planetary life as a whole self-regulating organism living amid the web of interdependent species and the traces of past lives. We cannot conquer nature without defeating ourselves. Recognition of this truth is fundamental to survival of life on this planet. James Lovelock has named this entity of self-regulating organism Gaia after the ancient Greek Goddess of the Earth. Another eminent scientist of the modern age Fritj of Capra says in his recent book—*The Turning Point*:

*We have lost touch with our biological and ecological base more than any other civilization in the past. This separation manifests itself in a striking disparity between the development of intellectual power, scientific knowledge and technological skills, on the one hand, and of wisdom, spirituality and ethics on the other hand.*

The ecological and environmental crisis that grips us today is of our own making. We have ignored the principle of *ahimsa* in our day-to-day dealings. The web of relationship between humans and non-humans has been disrupted only because our behavior towards non-humans is excessively violent.

The Jain principle of *ahimsa* is an ecological ethic. Though equally important are the other four principles of Jainism viz. non-stealing, truth, *aparigrah* (non-possession) and *brahmcharya* (abstinence from sexual lust), they are more or less there to strengthen the principle of *ahimsa* only.

*Ahimsa* is the highest point of the development of human civilization and culture. *Himsa* (violence) is inextricably intertwined with human life but it is not considered a part of its development. More and more people in the world now realize the importance of *ahimsa* for human

survival in the wake of the two nuclear holocausts that took the toll of two million lives in the forties of this century and the phenomenal rise of violence in the form of ethnic, religious and political wars and conflicts dotting the length and breadth of the globe today. Humanity seems to be heading fast for disaster as we see it plunged into chaos and anarchy.

### **Violence : Definition and Causes**

Before we analyze the causes of violence, let us first try to understand as to what we actually mean by violence. Examples of physical violence need not to be explained as they are universally known forms of violence since these examples describe just one aspect of violence. The noted Jain scholar Umasvati has defined violence in Tattvartha Sutra in the following words:

*'pramattayogat pranauyaparopanam himsa'*  
(Taking life away out of passion is violence)

Passion includes the powerful emotions of anger, pride, deceit and greed or we can say that an injury to life motivated by passion is violence. If an injury is caused without deliberate intention, it does not of itself constitute an evil act since it is not accompanied by any feeling of attachment or hatred. As social beings we cannot escape violence in its totality so the Jain scriptures advise the *shravaks* or votaries to at least refrain from unnecessary violence and follow ANUVRAT (basic vows). The acts of violence that we see in society today are being committed out of intense feelings of hatred, possessiveness, jealousy, carnality. Violence first arises in thought and is poured out verbally i.e. in words. When the passion grows uncontrollable, it leads to ghastly physical violence. Hence, whether it is the unrestrained *use* of water, air, plants, vegetables or the unrestrained destruction of forests to satisfy one's limitless greed, the origin is the mind of man. Deeply concerned about the tide of violence closing in on humankind, Robert Muller—the then former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations and the Chancellor Emeritus of the University for Peace Costa Rica suggested that a commission consisting of Heads of State should be appointed by the UN to deal with all forms of violence in the world today: physical violence, verbal, visual and mental violence. It should deal with violence against children, in families, in communities, in the streets, among religions, in international relations, among all groups of this planet

including violence against our brothers and sisters, animals and violence which prevail at this moment in the world. Late His Holiness Acharya Mahapragya, a noted Jain thinker and head of Svetamber Terapanth Jain sect says:

*Both violence and nonviolence inhere in us. Our mind also works in two ways: one dictates anger; the other counsels patience, puts the brakes on anger. Both the instigating and the restraining tendencies are there. Good and evil are both present in us. The real question is which of the two we shall develop. Which one shall we awaken and which one shall we put to sleep?*

He further opines that the violence prevalent in society cannot be put an end to without developing spiritual nonviolence. It is based on the unity and equality of all souls—souls of all sentient beings on this globe.

### **Ahimsa (nonviolence) in Various Faiths**

All religious traditions of the world agree that *ahimsa* alone can be the basis of our survival. In Dhammapada, a Buddhist sacred text, it is stated, *Ahimska ye munayo nichham koyen sanvutta: te yanti achutam thanam yatth gantva na sochre* (He who lives a life of self-restraint rooted in *ahimsa* attains to the state of immortality. After achieving it he will never experience sorrow). The Vedic culture begins with the life of actions and enjoyment and proceeds towards the life of austerity and renunciation, but the *shramanic* culture originates in renunciation from the very beginning. In Manusmriti, written by Manu—the celebrated personage regarded as the representative man and father of human race, we come across many *slokas* (verses) which confirm the principle of complete nonviolence for living the good life. At one place it is stated *indriyanam nirodhen ragdweshkshayen cha ahimsaya cha bhutanammrittivaya kalpate* (By controlling sensual desires, renunciation of attachment and enmity and observance of *ahimsa*, a *sanyasi* (ascetic) attains liberation (*moksha*)).

Thus, even Vedic and Upnishadic culture emphasizes the observance of *ahimsa* in our life. In Mahabharata, it is said: *ahimsa sakalo dharmo himsa dharmstthahitah*—(*Ahimsa* is in itself a complete religion and *himsa* [violence] is a great sin).

The Persian holy scripture *AVESTA* (*JUDAISM*) lays down three kinds of duties for human beings:

- (i) to turn our foe into a friend.
- (ii) to change a wicked person into a righteous human being.
- (iii) to change an ignorant man into a knowledgeable and learned person.

Treating a foe like a friend depends entirely on the principle of *ahimsa*. In the Old Testament we come across, Ten Commandments which express the ideal of man's duty to God and his neighbour by which Moses organized and led the Israelites into nationhood and are the basic tenets of the Jewish religion. Christians accept the Decalogue, together with Christ's example and teaching, as the basis of their morality. The sixth commandment says '*Do not kill anyone*'. These commandments also forbid adultery, stealing and lust.

Jesus said:

*Ye have heard that it was said, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth", but I say unto you, resist not him that is evil but whosoever smiteth thee on thee right cheek turn to him the other also. And if any man would go to law with thee and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also (Matt. 5:39-40). Jesus continues, "Love your enemies—pray for your prosecutors, so that you may show yourself true sons of your Father in Heaven, for lie makes His sun rise on bad and good alike and makes the rain fall on both upright and wrong doers, for If you love only those who love you, what is there remarkable in that?"*

In the Christian tradition love is synonymous with God or what we call *ahimsa*. The concept of nonviolence differs in its observance in various traditions. Some go to an extreme length while others adopt a middle course in solving day-to-day problems, keeping in mind the spirit of equality, brotherhood, love and purity of character. The Islamic view of nonviolence differs in that it gives full consideration to human weakness. The Holy Quoran says :

*We ordained  
For the children of Israel  
That if anyone slew  
A person—unless it be  
Murder for spreading  
Mischief in the land—  
It would be as if  
He slew the whole people  
And if anyone saved*

*a life.*

*It would be as if he  
saved the life of the whole  
people. (5:35)*

The teachings of LaoTse and Confucious emphasize austerity and simplicity in life. LaoTse exhorts his followers to heal the wounds of violence by love and compassion. Confucious asks people to exercise restraint in their behaviour. He says:

*“Cause the flood of love in the stream of life and disseminate the message of friendship.”*

### **Gandhi and Ahimsa**

Gandhi’s legacy of *ahimsa* has created a deep impact on the world. He demonstrated to us the immense power of *ahimsa* by using it as an effective weapon to achieve independence for India without shedding blood. He was deeply influenced by the Jain scholar Raichandbhai. Gandhi has written,

*“For me there is no religion other than the religion of truth, no duty other than ahimsa. Ahimsa is the greatest religion for me. I can say with assurance, as a result of my experiments, that a perfect vision of truth can follow a complete realization of ahimsa.”*

Gandhi lived *ahimsa* in his life. According to him, violence is bred by inequality, nonviolence by equality, I quote Gandhi’s own words again to elucidate his concept of nonviolence:

*Identification with everything that lives is impossible without self-purification; without self-purification the observance of the law of ahimsa must remain an empty dream. But the path of self-purification is hard and steep. To attain to perfect purity one has to become absolutely passion-free in thought, speech and action; to rise above the opposing currents of love and hatred, attachment and repulsion.*

### **The Jain Principle of Ahimsa**

Jainism is one of the most ancient of Indian religious traditions. It is also the oldest non-Vedic school of thought. The word ‘*Jaina*’ is taken

from 'Jina' which means conquerors or victors. Those who destroy all the bad karmas through austerities, penance and practise and observe the vow of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) in its totality i.e. do not react to any form of provocation or physical injury inflicted upon them in words, thoughts and in their actions become *arhats*. Jains are the followers of *Jinas*—the twenty-four Tirthankars. The first Tirthankar was Lord RISHABH and the last Tirthankar was Lord MAHAVIRA (500 years BC). The Jain view of nonviolence enjoins its followers to refrain from indulging in violence in thought, word and action. It believes in the equality of all living beings and in the state of equanimity. *Ahimsa* results from the equanimous state of mind. *Ahimsa* in the Jinist tradition means reverence for all forms of life and avoidance of violence in thought, word and deed. A Jain ascetic observes *ahimsa* in its totality himself. He doesn't encourage others to resort to violence in thought, word and deed nor does he endorse it in thought, word and deed. In *Acarang Sutra* *ahimsa* has been proclaimed in the following words:

*Injurious activities inspired by self-interest lead to evil and darkness. This is what is called bondage, delusion, death, and hell. To do harm to others is to do harm to oneself. "Thou art he whom thou intendest to kill! Thou art he whom thou intendest to tyrannize over!" We corrupt ourselves as soon as we intend to corrupt others. We kill ourselves as soon as we intend to kill others. Ahimsa sprouts from a person's inner awakening. It conveys many things simultaneously whereas the word 'nonviolence' only indicates abstinence from physical violence.*

The Jain principle of *ahimsa* cannot be understood in its right perspective unless we have a clear insight into the Jain concepts of *jiva-ajiva* (animate and inanimate), *asarva-bandha* (influx and bondage), *samvar-nirjara* (inhibition of instincts and impulses and total uprooting of instincts and impulses) and *moksha* (emancipation resulting from *samvar* and *nirjara*). Just as the famous four noble truths of Buddhism namely, suffering, cause of suffering, emancipation and the path leading to emancipation admits that if there is suffering in this world, there is the cause of suffering and there is a cure, a way to end this suffering and attain *nirvana*, similarly the Jains believe that the world is full of suffering and the cause of suffering is *himsa* (causing injury to *jivas*—all forms of life) which includes causing actual physical injury to *jivas* or causing injury through unpleasant and violent words or thoughts. As a result of *himsa* (violence) in thought, word and deed, there is influx of karmic matter which adds to the misery and suffering of the *jivas* who

indulge in it in the present life and in the life hereafter and causes karmic bondage leading a *jiva* to be born in different species in accordance with the nature of his crime and criminality and in order to destroy the karmic bondage a *jiva* has to repent of his *himsa* by *nirjara* i.e. austerities, penance and observance of complete nonviolence (*ahimsa*) and equanimity of mind and by undergoing rigorous forms of self-suffering and ultimately it will attain to *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of death and birth).

Lord Mahavira has classified *jivas* (all forms of life on this planet) into six categories. The very discussion on Jain concept of *ahimsa* is meaningless unless we perceive the most subtle and complex structure of living organisms on this planet. According to him, the entire planet is nothing but a mass of living organisms. His theory of *jiva* is called *shadjivnikaya* [six forms of life i.e. *prathvikaya* (earth), *apkaya* (water), *askaya* (fire), *vayukaya* (air), *vanaspatikaya* (vegetation) and *traskaya* (mobile living organisms)]. The other philosophers do not recognize earth, water, fire and air as living organisms, but according to Mahavira, they are. It will be useful to reproduce the dialogue between Lord Mahavira and his disciple Gautam:

**Gautam—** *On being attacked what sort of pain does the earth-body experience?*

**Mahavira—** *Gautam! suppose a young and strong man hits an old and feeble person on the head with both his hands, what sort of pain does the old man feel on being hit on the head by both the hands of the young man?*

**Gautam—** *O Lord! the old man would feel excruciating pain.*

**Mahavira—** *O Gautam! on being attacked the earth-body feels much more pain than that experienced by an old man.*

Other religious traditions enjoin their disciples to show compassion towards animals and human beings while some others also agree that vegetation has life and trees and plants feel pain when touched or hit but none of them would believe that the earth or water or air or fire are also living organisms.

Mahavira advises his ascetics to be careful and vigilant and not to cause injury even to earth-bodies, fire-bodies, water-bodies and air-bodies. A Jain ascetic is supposed to refrain from indulging in violence



towards all six kinds of diverse forms of life on this planet. Mahavira's principle of *shadjivanikaya* is unique. In a way we can even call it something transcendental. Acharva Sidhsen has written referring to Mahavira:

*“O venerable one! Your doctrine of shadjivnikaya alone would suffice to establish that you are omniscient. No other proof is required.”*

Truly Mahavira's spiritual perfection and the dawn of *ahimsa* in him enabled him to attain cosmic vision.

Mahavira's *ahimsa* is all encompassing and recognizes the right of existence for all *jivas* (souls) whether they are *earth-bodied* or *fire-bodied* or *water-bodied* or *air-bodied* or mobile creatures. All *jivas* (life forms) are equal. If a householder finds it impossible to refrain from *himsa* in its totality for his survival, he should be absolutely clear in his mind that he is doing *himsa* and should ask for the forgiveness of the *jivas* being killed for his sustenance.

He devised a separate code of conduct for his votaries based on basic vows (*anuurats*) which enjoins on them to practise self-restraint and tolerance. For ascetics the five-fold path consisting of the five great vows (*mahavrats*), *ahimsa* (nonviolence) in thought, word and deed, *truth*, *non-stealing*, *brahmcharya* (the practice of chastity in thought, word and deed) and *non-acquisitiveness* (*aparigrah*) is a path of complete renunciation of *himsa* in any form. While the aim of an ascetic is to attain to liberation (*moksha*), the aim of a Jain householder is to move progressively towards the attainment of liberation. The ecological and environment degradation that has posed a grave threat not only to the existence of humanity which is at the root of the crisis but also to other species of the planet which are facing great difficulties and are almost on the verge of annihilation can be checked even at this stage if the scientific community studies the basic principles of Jainism and advises the people; to switch over to the Jain lifestyle rooted in *ahimsa*. Mahavira says to his disciples:

*“The Arhats (venerable perfect souls) of the past, those of the present and the future narrate, discourse, proclaim and assert that one should not injure, subjugate, enslave, torture or kill any animal, living being, organism or sentient being. The doctrine of ahimsa is immaculate, immutable and eternal.”* He further said, *“Those who resort to and remain engrossed in violence suffer (the miseries of) transmigration again and again.”*

Thus, the Jain principle of *ahimsa* is based on the theory of *shad-jivnikaya* (six kinds of life forms classified by Mahavira) while elucidating his most subtle, profound and realistic concept of nonviolence most relevant in the present ecological crisis which in a public hearing in Europe has been described in the following words:

*The important problems are: environmental deterioration in many regions, nearing catastrophic proportions; poverty boarding on indigence for most of the population: intense social differentiation, hastening the disintegration of society; loss of a system of values, with disorientation of much of population; growing criminality, with no guarantees of safety; disappearance of the country's labour potential.*

Mahavira has added a new dimension to the concept of *ahimsa*, called ANEKANTVAD (The doctrine that truth is many-sided). Elucidating it in his famous book entitled “*The Jain Declaration of Nature*” Dr L.M. Singhvi—the former High Commissioner of India in U.K. says:

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

*Ahimsa* is the basic principle of Jainism and is the quintessence of all that it stands for. The age we live in is an age of science and reason. It is also an age of democracy which attaches utmost importance to democracy but most religious traditions consider God as the supreme ruler without whose wish nothing moves in the universe. Contrary to this belief Jainism considers God a perfect liberated soul free from all forms of passions. He doesn't rule the universe but regards all *jivas* (souls) as

equal and bestows on each of them the right to attain to the state of godhood. In other words, all *jivas* can become gods provided they tread the path of purification and practise equanimity of mind. Their elevation is determined by their deeds and not by God's special compassion. Autocracy is a word not found in the dictionary of the Jains. No *Tirthankara* (the highest spiritual authority in the Jain tradition) can send any *jiva* either to heaven or to hell but surely one can attain *moksha* or liberation by the path shown by them. What I mean is that equality and true democracy are the pillars of Jainism.

### ***Ahimsa* and Ecology**

As has already been stated *ahimsa* itself is an ecological ethic. Once a person realizes that since every living being wants to live, it is unethical and sinful to kill. Nonkilling is the greatest religion. It enjoins people to live and let live. In the Jain concept of *ahimsa* mental and verbal forms of violence are more dangerous than the forms of physical violence. The idea of killing or doing harm to others or conspiring against others first originates in the human mind. The main reason of this inclination in human mind is the rise of the four major passions i.e. attachment, hatred, pride and deceit. As a result, man not only behaves unethically towards his own fellow humans but also towards non-humans (environment). The modern eco-philosopher Prof. Arne Naes has rightly stated that the ecological crisis emanates from man's unrestrained violent attitude towards non-humans. Ecological harmony demands that both humans and non-humans should flourish together. It is possible only when man observes *ahimsa* in his day-today life. Complete abstinence from violence is impossible for a householder so Lord Mahavira said that he should at least abstain from inessential violence. Essential violence relates to man's survival and inessential violence is what he indulges in for his comfort, cosmetic decoration and to satisfy his greed. If humans take this pledge that they will refrain from indulging in inessential violence and will do the least harm to environment, it will result in sustainable ecological harmony.

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