

JAIN ECOLOGY: A SOURCE OF SURVIVAL INTO THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

I feel a sense of exhilaration at my being able to come to this beautiful German city charged with powerful spiritual vibrations and participate in this august gathering of the representatives of different faiths who have come from distant parts of the globe just to share their perceptions and views with others and show their solidarity with the spiritual forces of the world.

I also seize the opportunity to thank the organizers for having invited me to make a presentation on the Jain View of the ecological and environmental crisis threatening human survival.

Dismal World Scenario

Life on the planet earth is sustained by energy from the sun. There is no other source for its survival. Things are cycled and recycled through earth, air and water by countless lives, from microbes to mammals. There has neither been a loss nor a gain in the materials available on the planet since the earth came into existence. Forms of objects keep changing. Individuals die, the life community continues forever. Species appear in diverse forms and disappear gradually. This cycle of life has been shaping and creating this planet earth from time immemorial, maintaining a perfect equilibrium.

The advent of our own species (homo sapiens) also didn't disrupt this harmonious interdependent existence till the end of the nineteenth century. But its impact on the life of the planet is becoming extraordinary day by day. In the last 100 years alone our numbers have quadrupled and our consumption has risen to an alarming degree. We are confronted with the problems of space and resources. As a result we are becoming violent and aggressive. Blinded by greed and lust for amassing wealth, we have caused many species to become extinct and have almost destroyed the biological diversity of nature. The celebrated scientist James Lovelock, who was appalled at the rapid devastation of the biodiversity of the earth, felt that our planet might be alive, a self sustaining entity, Gaia – the goddess earth. Human impact now threatens to outweigh the stabilizing capacity of Gaia. In the words of James Lovelock the Gaia is critically ill. We humans are responsible for this sordid state of the planet on account of our unrestrained and irresponsible behavior. We have degraded its integrity, caused changes in its climate and have stripped it of its natural resources like forests and wetlands. We have contaminated its waters, land, air and life with harmful pollutants. To add to its agony, weapons of mass destruction including chemical weapons have endangered its biochemistry. Children born in developed countries consume more and waste more while those in the poor and developing countries are starving. Only a handful of the earth's nations monopolize its resources reducing the vast population inhabiting the other regions of the earth to abject poverty and unending misery. In a South-East Asia Public Hearing it was stated that 'the poor in growing numbers add to the destruction of the environment. This is the root cause

of their poverty which church functionaries and those in political power are embarrassingly silent about'. The destruction of the natural-resource base is doomed to continue as long as the conditions of poverty remain unaddressed and human population keeps multiplying.

This dismal scenario makes it imperative for all religious leaders to pay utmost attention to the problem of poverty which is at the root of the environmental and ecological degradation. The Jain believe that only self-restraint and disciplined way of living on the part of humans can save this planet from destruction. The Jain religious tradition enjoins its followers to show reverence to all living beings-be they humans or plants or microbes and is thus naturally contributing to environmental and ecological harmony.

Jain Ecology: Concept and Meaning

Jain ecology is embedded in the belief that the whole planet earth is comprised of two distinct entities i.e. *jiva* (conscious beings) and *ajiva* (insentient beings) and that all *jivas* are 'bound together by mutual support and interdependence' (*parasparopagraho jivanam*). No substance on the planet is either altogether dissimilar or altogether similar. Both *jiva* and *ajiva* differ on account of their peculiar characteristics. Each *jiva*- it may be a human or a microbe or a bird or an animal or a plant is an independent existence. It is born and reborn in different forms (species). Each *jiva*, in whatever form it may be, is sacred and is never to be killed. All *jivas* are divided into six categories: (i) earth-bodied, (ii) water bodied, (iii) fire-bodied, (iv) air-bodied, (v) plants and (vi) mobile-bodied. The mobile-bodied *jivas* are of many kinds i.e. (i) possessed of one sense, (ii) possessed of two senses, (iii) possessed of three senses, (iv) possessed of four senses and (v) possessed of five senses. They may be endowed or unendowed with mind. No *jiva* is meant for another *jiva*. Though man is the most developed species, no *jiva*, in whatever form it may be, big or small, is for him. He has no right to subject anyone of these to violence. Jain ecology stresses restraint in the use of natural resources for life. It restricts the use of natural resources to bare minimum, just enough for sustenance.

Jain Ecology: Basic Principles

His Holiness Acharya Mahapragya, a widely revered Jain ascetic and thinker, has laid down five basic principles of Jain ecology : (i) *jivas* and materialistic objects affect each other, (ii) our physical environment and *jivas* are interdependent, (iii) any disturbance or disruption caused in any one of the rings that constitute the planet i.e. water, earth, air and fuel will cause a chain reaction affecting all other rings adversely, (iv) *jivas* can survive only in a particular state of the environment, and (v) nature's equilibrium should not be disturbed. I reproduce below what Lord Mahavira – the 24th Jain Tirthankar (the most sanctified soul) said 2600 years ago :

“Earth, water, fire, air and plants are all sentient. Do not reject their existence, for it amounts to rejecting one’s own existence. He alone can reject their existence who rejects his own existence. Only that person can

do justice to the environment who accepts the existence of all jivas, mobile, immobile, perceptible, imperceptible.”

Man's life will come to an end if he doesn't use clay etc. But we must realize the fact that the use of natural resources is man's necessity. It will be wrong if we equate a necessity with a right. All *jivas* want to live, none wants to die. Hence one devoted to spirituality must never kill any one. The Jains have a unique tradition that enjoins every *shravak* to seek permission from the invisible power controlling the planet before he takes any object from the earth for his use. If an object is taken without permission, even if it is a straw, it amounts to virtual stealing. This tradition has led the Jain community worldwide to emerge as the most ecology friendly community. The excessive use or hoarding of a thing, the lack of which causes harm and difficulty to others, is also forbidden and is regarded as a kind of theft because it deprives another one of its use and it comes under the category of *adattadan* (taking away objects not permitted). Gandhi said: 'In this land there is enough for everyone's need but there is not enough for some people's greed.

Ahimsa as an Ecological Ethic

Jain ecology and ahimsa (nonviolence) are almost synonymous with each other. The Jains hail ahimsa as *parmo dharma* (the supreme religion). It may be described as the breath of ecology. Unless ahimsa becomes a way of life for each individual on this planet, the degradation of the earth's ecosystem cannot be stopped. Lord Mahavira says:

“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 nonviolence and no virtue of spirit greater than reverence for life.”

The world today lies mired in the tempestuous tide of violence and hatred. The threat of nuclear terrorism bred by religious fanaticism and unbridled political ambitions have made the lives of countless millions miserable and hellish. The principle of nonviolence alone has an answer to the violent conflicts that afflict a large number of the regions of the world. It is time religious leaders played a dominant role to free the world from the cult of violence and hatred closing in on all of us.

The Jain scriptures declare in unambiguous terms:

*“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.”*

Unfortunately when people in general talk of violence, they mean just the physical violence. They have no idea of the magnitude of the havoc verbal, mental and emotional violence cause. It is why the Jain concept of ahimsa is far deeper. It includes the violence that originates first in the hearts and minds of the individuals. The Jain vows

enjoin the *shravaks* to aschew violence in word, thought and action. It teaches us to be kind and considerate towards all. It will be worthwhile to quote what His Holiness Acharya Tulsi, who started the **Anuvrat Movement** in 1949 to inspire the people to adopt a nonviolent lifestyle says:

“Indian culture is dominated by spirituality and the soul of spirituality is ahimsa (nonviolence). It is the quintessence of all religions. The religion which is not allied to ahimsa cannot protect anyone. Bereft of ahimsa it is like a body without a soul. Despite its praise and adoration by all, we come across conflicting views as regards its form and nature. The circumference of its definitions is so vast and expansive that sometimes even its centre disappears. From one point of view it is an extensive royal road but from another point of view it is compared to a steep and narrow path hemmed in on either side by deep valleys. The path of ahimsa is narrower than the edge of a sword.”

The Jain Ethical Norms

The Jains believe that human behaviour should be governed by some ethical norms. Every *shravak* is expected to limit his desires and exercise restraint. The Jain code of conduct consists of the following *vrats* or vows:

- nonviolence in thought, word and deed,
- seeking and speaking the truth,
- behaving honestly and refraining from taking anything by force or theft,
- practice of restraint and chastity in thought, word and deed,
- practice of non-acquisitiveness.

The vow of ahimsa occupies a pride of place in the Jain religious tradition. Both ahimsa and Jainism have synonymous. The other vows are there just to strengthen the vow of ahimsa. The Jain code of conduct is thoroughly ecological and goes a long way in preventing the overuse of natural resource for life.

Anuvrat Movement

In order to take the Jain code of conduct to the masses and give it the shape of a mass movement for the regeneration of moral and spiritual values, late Acharya Tulsi, a leading Jain Acharya, took cue from the twelve-fold code of conduct consisting of twelve anuvrats. Lord Mahavira prescribed for his votaries and launched *Anuvrat Movement* to rid the world of violence and inspire the people to practise ecological ethic. **Anu** means small or basic and **vrat** means a vow. It is the only movement of its kind in the world that seeks to promote living in harmony with nature through individual commitment to certain basic human values – the degeneration of which is at the root of violence, hatred, religious fundamentalism, conflicts and ecological and environmental degradation that mark the world today.

Thousands of people across the world irrespective of their caste and creed have joined the network of self-transformed people. One of the *anuvrats* (basic vows), apart from the *anuvrats* of nonviolence and limited wealth, is specially designed to prevent people from harming the green belt of the earth. The Anuvrat Code of Conduct which more and more people are accepting worldwide is the most constructive and befitting step towards the saving of natural resources of the world. The movement has generated tremendous awareness among the people. I reproduce the Anuvrat Code of conduct for the benefit of readers:

1. I will not kill any innocent creature.
2. I will neither attack anybody nor support aggression and will endeavour to bring about world peace and disarmament.
3. I will not take part in violent agitations or in any destructive activities.
4. I will believe in human unity, will not discriminate on the basis of caste, colour, etc.
5. I will practise religious tolerance.
6. I will observe rectitude in my dealings with other people.
7. I will try to develop a pure tenor of life and control over senses.
8. I will not resort to unethical practices in elections.
9. I will not use intoxicants like alcohol, hemp, heroin, etc.
10. I will lead a life free from addictions.
11. I will do my best to refrain from such acts as are likely to cause pollution and harm the environment.

I conclude my presentation with the hope that more and more faiths will come forward to save nature. Natural resources for life are depleting rapidly. To save them, humans will have to switch over to a nonviolent and disciplined lifestyle. Religion has an important role to educate the people and inspire them to show reverence towards all forms of life.