

# **The Jain Response to the Problem of Environmental Degradation**

– Dr. Sohan Lal Gandhi

## **An Overview**

The most difficult problem that besets humanity today is that of environmental degradation and ecological imbalance. The environment is not only a source of man's sustenance but it also acts as a shield against threats to his survival. But man's lifestyle based on the erroneous assumption that natural resources are unlimited and that they are perpetually available has resulted in the rapid depletion of earth's resources. The rivers which used to flow throughout the year have partially or completely dried up, forests which ensured regular rains and preserved the earth's biodiversity have been destroyed to accommodate burgeoning human population. The lush green mountains have been denuded and glaciers are melting and have been reduced in size.

No one is opposed to the efforts for man's growth or progress but when only development remains the ultimate objective, eyes are shut to the harsh reality that the earth's resources are limited and human greed to grab and hoard resources increases beyond measure, the very development which is considered a mark of prosperity changes into a means of devastation. This is what is happening today. The developed countries have already grabbed most of the earth's natural resources to make the lives of their citizens more comfortable adding to the agony of the people living in developing or underdeveloped countries. The lack of education, poverty and greed are at the root of the environmental destruction that we see today. Compounded by the calamity of ecological deterioration, environmental malady seems to have taken the form of cancer.

Environment consists of the surroundings whereas ecology relates relationships between man and man and other living beings that inhabit the earth.

It analyses the behaviour of man towards his own people and also towards biologically diverse living beings. Man seems to think that all other living beings on this planet are there to make his life comfortable. It was why he embarked on a killing spree. Many vitally important species needed for our survival have already disappeared, many of them are endangered and many more are exposed to death as natural surroundings which sustained them have been ruined.

Mahatma Gandhi once wrote, “We have enough resources on the earth for our need but not enough for our greed.” We now realize how human greed has caused shortage of what we need to live. It is his greed that is responsible for the gradual destruction of the environmental shield. I would like to quote what Tom Brokaw once said, ‘It will do us little good to wire the world if we short-circuit our souls. There is no delete button for racism, poverty or sectarian violence. No keystroke can ever clean the air, save a river, preserve a forest. This new technology must be an extension of our hearts as well as of our mind.’ But it seems we continue to short-circuit our souls and our hearts have yet to extend towards others.

Environmental degradation is inextricably linked with peace, security and human rights. We must change our lifestyle if we wish our environment to be protected. Man’s unrestrained lifestyle is causing alarming increase in green house gases emissions. As a result holes have appeared in our ozone layers triggering global warming. The overall scenario on the environmental front is dismal and horrifying.

### **The Jain Response**

The Jain religion is an environment friendly religion since it doesn’t allow its adherents to behave wantonly disregarding the existence of other living beings on this planet. The following words of Lord Mahavira, the 24<sup>th</sup> Jain Tirthankara of the Jain tradition, constitute a profound truth for all times.

“One who neglects or disregards the existence of earth, air, fire, water and vegetation, disregards his own existence which is entwined with them”

It makes it clear that Jainism doesn't allow its lay persons to disregard their environment. According to it all living beings are equal. It doesn't give an exalted status to a human being vis-à-vis other living beings of this earth. Every living being wants to live so no living being deserves to be killed. When the modern ecologist like Arne Naes says that non-humans are equally important and they should be allowed to flourish with humans, he is only echoing what Lord Mahavira had said more than 2500 years ago. It is now being increasingly realized that the disregard of non-humans is threatening our survival into the third millennium.

The Jains believe that this earth is a mass of both *jiva* (sentient entities) and *ajiva* (non-sentient entities). Sentient entities are helped to live by non-sentient entities. Both *jiva* and *ajiva* co-exist. Without *ajiva* (matter) *jiva* (sentient entities which include humans, animals, plants etc.) cannot survive. The Jains believe that there are two kinds of *jivas* (living beings) i.e. those that move, hear, taste, touch, smell and those that cannot move and have only one sense i.e. touch. But all living beings whether humans, animals or plants have souls and are independent entities. They too have an equal right to share the earth's resources and live. Therefore the Jains preach the eternal value of nonviolence towards not only humans but towards animals, all biologically diverse beings and even trees, rivers, mountains, air and fire.

Lord Mahavira had stated,

“*parasparopgraho jivänäm – Tattvärtha Sutra*” which means all life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence. (If one does not care for nature one does not care for oneself).

The above Jain scriptural aphorism 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 constitutes

Our survival and co-existence depend on one another. But we see a new phenomenon of alienation emerging in human behaviour. Earlier man's behaviour towards his own fellow beings began to be hostile and unfriendly. It is a matter of great sadness that he has now become hostile to the mute and helpless creatures around him. The Jain ecological philosophy 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<sup>th</sup> Jinas or Tirthankaras of this era whose example and teachings have been its living legacy through the millennia.

The Jain response to the problem of polluted environment consists in its well-defined environmental ethic which lays down a five-fold path for all its votaries.

#### **1. The five *vratas* (vows)**

The five *vratas* (vows) in the Jain environmental ethic are:

- nonviolence 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 practise 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.

## **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 endeavour to live a life of moderation and restraint and to practise 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.

#### **5. Charity**

The Jains believe in the ideal of non-possession. But since we are worldly creatures we need some or other possession to sustain ourselves. However we must limit our needs and give to the needs from our own resources or wealth. Charity is a form of compassion. The Jain religion says 'Less is More' so do not possess more than what is needed and give the excess to the needy.

The Jain response to environmental problem consists in self-restraint and limitation of our needs so that both humans and non-humans can flourish.