

Lord Mahavira's Twelve-fold Anuvrat Code of Conduct : A Shield Against Non-Sustainability

Dismal Scenario

Humanity today is passing through an unprecedented crisis of its survival. The advent of science is both a boon and a curse simultaneously. It has, no doubt, made our life comfortable but it has also made the planet unlivable and non-sustainable. Mountains have become barren, rivers have dried up, forests have disappeared and many important species vitally important for our survival have vanished. Virtually there is a great crisis of sustainability.

In the days gone by man's needs were limited. So there were neither industries nor factories. Their needs were fulfilled by locally produced goods. The emphasis was on simple living and high thinking. Horses and the chariots driven by them were the only means of fast travelling. Ordinary people mostly travelled on foot but those who were old and sick used bullock carts to move from one place to another. They moved out of their homes only if a relative died at a different place or weddings of their kith and kin took place in another town. The less their needs, the happier they were. But science has changed things drastically. It has given man not only trains, cars, buses to travel by but airplanes as well. Now he can fly like a bird, swim like fish and can cover road distances by cars and buses at terrific speeds. His desire has multiplied. Not only has his desire for a variety of dresses, clothes, cars, houses increased but his greed for amassing wealth has grown manifold. In order to fulfill his burgeoning needs a large number of industries, factories workshops have mushroomed all over the world. The culture of consumerism continues to sweep the world. As a result the sustainability of the earth has begun to be eroded. On account of life savings drugs and surgeries man's life span has increased manifold.

Reduction in mortality rate has created a problem of population explosion. Two hundred years ago the total population of the earth was a little more than a billion. It took the humanity 10 thousand years to become a billion but in a span of just two hundred years it has become seven billion. Thus the unusual increase in population and its ever-increasing needs have become a double-edged sword to destroy the sustainability of the planet earth. Despite UN's initiative to compel governments to cut the emissions of greenhouse gases by using scientific techniques it will prove ineffective unless parallel efforts are made to encourage people to minimize their needs and save energy.

Lord Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara of the nonviolent Jain tradition foresaw the advent of a world of non-sustainability, indignity, exploitation and violence 2500 years ago and preached self-restraint which is the only way to save the planet.

He enjoined his votaries (*shravaks* and *shravikas*) to go slow on development so that some resources are also saved for the future generation. He propounded two categories of *dharma* (righteousness) - *agaara dharma* (householder's *dharma*) and *anagaara dharma* (*dharma* for an ascetic). Lord Mahavira was of the view that everyone on this planet should follow the path of *dharma* (ethical conduct) based on righteousness whether one is an ascetic or a householder. Since an ascetic renounces the world, it is expected that he would refrain from sinful activities in their totality. But it is not possible to do so far a householder as violence is inevitable in his day-today activities. So Bhagwan Mahavira laid down a twelvefold code of conduct for him. Though he designed the small vows (*vratas*) for householders keeping in mind the evil practices prevalent in his time I find all these vows extremely relevant even today when we face the challenges of the global market and the dignity of human life is in peril.

Mahavira had predicted progressive degeneration of values in society and painted a bleak picture of the social and religious life in the fifth segment of the descending half-cycle when the cult of violence, dishonesty, falsehood, theft, deceit, treachery and possessiveness would dominate the lives of the people. All *vratas* (vows) are based on right faith (*samyaka darshan*), right knowledge (*samyaka gyaana*) and right conduct (*samyaka charitra*) - the three jewels of the Jain religion.

The Twelve-fold Code of Conduct

One of the greatest problems that humanity faces today is the problem of unrestrained consumerism. It has caused immense harm to the planet earth. In the words of the celebrated scientist James Lovelock, the mother earth is critically ill. Thanks to globalization that the mother earth is on a ventilator today. To restore the mother earth's health, the ethical code of conduct consisting of twelve small vows (*anuvratas*) will work as a panacea. It is virtually a blueprint for a world without exploitation. A Jain layperson takes a vow that he would observe the twelve small vows as given below :

(1) Refraining from violence

He will not kill a living being, will not ask anyone else to do so, nor will he support the killing carried out by others.

This small vow alone can protect many humans from indignity and atrocities. This vow will prevent man not only from killing his fellow human beings but all living beings, intentionally. The modern man commits senseless violence deliberately. Lord Mahavira knew that it was not possible for a householder to abstain from violence in its entirety so he enjoined them to refrain from killing at least mobile living beings including human beings, animals, birds, insects and microbes.

Out of this bludgeoning population even if less than a billion people of the planet pledge themselves to observe this vow, a culture of peace and nonviolence will prevail. This vow also enjoins a householder to minimize the killing of immovable life forms including those found in water, fire, vegetation and grain etc. The message inherent in it is that the wastage of water, electricity, food should be avoided at any cost. This vow alone has in it the greatest safeguard against non-sustainability.

- (2) The second small vow is **refraining from lying**. It is not possible for a householder to abstain from total falsehoods, so Lord Mahavira explained that he should at least not give false information about a bride or bridegroom while establishing matrimonial relationships, about animals while selling them, about houses, buildings, cultivable and uncultivable pieces of land while deciding a deal with others. It also enjoins a person to refrain from misappropriating the deposits left with him, making a false statement in or out of the court and forging fake documents. Thus this vow covers a whole range of situations which can generate conflicts, feuds and quarrels. It ensures peace and stability in social life and saves a person from being deceived.
- (3) The third small vow is **abstaining from taking anything that is not given** (*adattadaana*). For a householder it is not possible to abstain from the subtle acts of thefts, hence this vow enjoins him not to take a thing which is not given to him by the owner. We see the incidents of thefts, robberies, illegal encroachments of land, pick-pocketing, smuggling, buying or accepting stolen property, black-marketing on the rise these days. This vow forbids all these acts of depriving others of their possessions by thefts and encroachments. Taking things not given is the root cause of murders, bloody conflicts that we see today.
- (4) The fourth small vow for householders is **refraining from illicit sexual contacts**. This vow commands a householder to avoid sexual contacts with the wives of others or unmarried women, widows and harlots. There is a phenomenal rise in the incidents of rape and murder in globalized market all over the world. It is one of the most potential causes of violence in society.

This vow enjoins a householder to restrict his sexual contact to his wife only.

- (5) The fifth small vow of **limiting one's possessions**.

Desire has no end. It is limitless. Unrestrained individual desires have caused havoc to the planet earth. The cult of consumerism which encourages a person to spend more, produce more and amass wealth beyond limits is responsible for all our woes today. The rich are growing richer and the poor

are becoming poorer. Man's greed to usurp resources of the planet has almost denuded it of its basic cover in the form of fauna and flora. This vow enjoins the Jain votaries to limit their possessions including houses, cars, clothes, ornaments, items of furniture. Excessive accumulation of riches is a sin and to have such a desire is also a sin of equal measure. Man should possess only as much as he needs. Lord Mahavira's emphasis on limiting one's needs will go a long way in eliminating poverty from the world.

Apart from the above five small vows, there are three *gunvratas* and four *shikshavratas*.

Three Gunavratas

(6) **This vow of limiting the area of one's unvirtuous activities.** A person should vow that he would not go beyond a specific distance in all ten directions for his business or other worldly activities. If an individual takes this small vow he becomes indirectly instrumental in reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

(7) **The vow of limiting the quantity of things one will use in one's daily life.**

This vow enjoins a Jain votary to limit the use of eatables, water etc. A Jain *shravak* limits the items of eating, many of them even take a vow to subsist on just one or two items of food for days together. I consider it a leap forward in the direction of alleviating hunger from the face of the world.

(8) **Abstinence from purposeless harmful activities.**

A householder's life is full of unvirtuous activities which are a hindrance in the path of his liberation. He can at least abstain from purposeless activities like giving harmful advice, giving means of destroying life to others, thinking continuously of doing harm to others, thoughtless behaviour like digging and igniting fire etc.

Four shikshavratas

(9) **The vow of doing a *samayika* a day** i.e. remaining completely equanimous for a fixed period. It gives the householder an opportunity to reflect and introspect about his activities every day. It makes him conscious of his ethical behaviour.

(10) **The vow of reducing the limits fixed in the sixth vow.**

This vow further curtails the area of a person's unvirtuous activities.

(11) **The vow of observing a fast and living like a monk for a day.**

Observing a fast in a week or once a month is an important religious practice prevalent in Indian society. The Jain religion has enhanced the importance of fast by adding the practice of living like a monk or nun for a day in a month.

(12) **The vow of sharing one's resources or food with deserving persons.**

This small vow alone can take care of the starving and hungry persons in the world. If every individual on this earth decides to share at least one item of his food with others it can wipe starvation and hunger from the face of this planet.

The basic *anuvratas* in this code of conduct are just five. The addition of three *gunavratas* and four *shikshavratas* makes this code of conduct twelve-fold.

Thus Bhagwan Mahavira's twelvefold code of conduct meant for his votaries has in it the potential to create a sustainable and livable world. I am of the view that a small beginning can be made. Even if an individual observes one or two of the above small his humble step of his will also go a long way in creating a world free from indignity, humiliation, poverty, hunger, deception and greed.