

## **The Jaina Ethic of Responsible Consumption and Eco-Sustainability of the Future**

**– Dr. S.L. Gandhi**

Human desire is endless. It has no limits. Before the advent of science man's needs were limited and so were his desires which were restricted to fulfilling his basic needs. But the advent of science changed the face of the planet radically. Its inventions galore were instrumental in the production of innumerable varieties of consumable and non-consumable goods. When man saw them he felt tempted and longed to have as many of them as he could. Ostentation became the hallmark of society. The more a person possessed things the more he was respected. It gave rise to greed and uncontrolled consumerism in society. Soon the whole world was swept away by this gale of hedonistic culture. As a result resources on the planet earth began to deplete at a terrific speed and sadly in the words of the noted scientist James Lovelock 'Gaia – the Mother Earth is now critically ill. It lies denuded of its flora and fauna.' The truth is that we are on the brink of an ecological disaster and an unprecedented crisis of sustainability looms large.

As we move ahead in the twenty first century the questions that agitate our minds today are : how long will the present civilization last? Will it survive into the third millennium? Will the people sacrifice some of their comforts and behave responsibly towards the needs of the future generations? The answers to these questions can be expressed in just one sentence - it depends on our attitude towards the needs of the future generations and life will survive only if we want.

Scientists say that the age of the earth is 4.6 billion years and life began on it 3.5 billion years ago. The research based on the discovery of human skulls reveals that the early modern human population emerged sixty thousand years ago. In mid 1994 the world population was 5.7 billion which increased at the rate of 8.6 million per year. 200 years ago the total human population was just one billion. In a span of 200 years it has become 7.5 billion.

What I want to emphasize here is that the earth's eco-system was intact till the end of the 18th century. Humans had limited needs, hence there were a very few industries and the growth of scientific technology was still in a state of infancy. As a result the natural resources of the planet didn't deplete. The earth's carrying capacity compensated the limited loss. Industries increased with the increase in the needs of man. The invention of steam engine created an industrial revolution in the 18th century. It changed the lifestyle of the people in Europe. People's greed for more wealth and desire for physical comforts, for looking smart and beautiful increased manifold. With the passage of time scientific and technological advancement changed the shape of the world. Steam energy was replaced by fossil fuel in the form of coal and petrol. Man's movement out of his house locally and into the wide world escalated at a terrific speed. The advent of cars, electricity, electric bulb, airplanes, electric trains, landline phones and mobile phones reduced the world to a small village. The west became rich and the east lagged far behind as regards roads, railways, airports and industries. With the arrival of the beautifully finished goods from the west local small industries lost their relevance. The environmental and ecological degradation that began in the west percolated into the far east. In quest for wealth, ostentation and political power and they could even resort to immoral practices and treachery. The unrestrained lifestyle of the people of the planet resulted in the rapid loss of natural resources. Excessive emissions of greenhouse gases on account of directionless development created many holes in the protective shield of humanity called ozone layers. Population explosion from mere one billion two centuries ago to 7.5 billion today has created unprecedented crisis of sustainability. The destruction of the most forests, disappearance of important species, drying up of rivers and rocky and barren mountains coupled with pollution have made the problem most complicated.

The irony is that the western countries are already developed. They have used up most of our fossil fuel and are living luxurious lives. They emit the largest amount of greenhouse gases and consume 85% resources of the planet. They are not ready to part with their comforts,

on the contrary the people in Asia are still struggling for development and many of them are suffering from the excruciating pangs of poverty.

The United Nations has convened many summits to solve the problem but has not yet succeeded. However, some sane voices are prevailing. The right thinking people across the world have begun to think of the ways to save for the future generations. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened considerably. Global warming, an apparent consequence of environmental and ecological degradation, is resulting in climate change.

It is true that we cannot survive without consumption but irresponsible consumption has turned into an epidemic at global level which needs to be curbed immediately. United Nations Organization is deeply concerned about this crisis and has laid down 17 goals of sustainable development. It depends on member-states for the accomplishment of these goals but governments alone cannot handle this ticklish problem since it concerns individual lifestyle. It's a social problem which cannot be eradicated solely by Govt. efforts. We need an independent global campaign for responsible consumption encouraging people to pledge themselves to reduce their consumable and non-consumable items of daily use. It alone can pave the way for the eco-sustainability of the future.

Though all religious traditions emphasize restraint in consumption, I find Lord Mahavira's twelvefold ethical code of conduct which he had laid down for the spiritual discipline of his laypersons superb and unique from all points of view. Since he was omniscient (*kevali*) he could foresee the crisis of sustainability and global warming. He had predicted that on account of man's wanton behaviour human life would be full of suffering. Apart from shortages of essential commodities the destruction of ecosystem would send the temperature soaring. Most rivers of world are dry and only big rivers such as the Ganges would still have some water. His transcendental knowledge also enabled him to see that water fire, earth, air etc. were full of innumerable invisible life forms. Every

life form is important so no life form including microbes, insects, germs should be destroyed. They are all a part of our eco-system.

It is difficult for a householder to refrain from violence totally but he should at least avoid intentional and deliberate violence and take a vow that he would abstain from inessential violence. Similarly it is not possible for him to practise truth in its entirety but he should at least take a small vow of truthfulness to avoid false statements. The third small vow that he had prescribed for a householder is to refrain from taking anything without the permission of its owner. The fourth small vow enjoins a householder to desist from illicit sexual activity. One shouldn't have sex with anyone other than one's spouse. The fifth small vow enjoins the householder to voluntarily limit his possessions, including wealth, houses, animals, land and so on. I am astonished at Lord Mahavira's wisdom. He had foreseen the calamity that would befall humanity and exhorted his votaries to exercise restraint in all their activities because they were not alone on this planet. Not only humans but every living form is an independent entity – be it an elephant, an ant, a microbe so they should minimize their needs for the survival of other life forms. The five small vows mentioned above are a blueprint to a road to sustainability.

In addition to these five small vows Lord Mahavira also added seven supplementaries to his votary's code of conduct. They are 'refraining from movement beyond a limited area restricting movement to an even more limited area, abstaining from wanton environmental destruction in thought, word and deed, keeping aloof from all sinful activities for a period of 48 minutes daily. The other supplementaries include fasting on sacred days, observing special restrictions at a solitary place, limiting consumable and non-consumable items of daily use and sharing food and resources with others including monks and nuns.

Though all the twelve small vows (*anuvrats*) are a roadmap to the path of sustainability, the two vows known as *parigrahaparimana* (limiting one's possessions) and *bhogopabhogaparimana* (limiting one's consumable and non-consumable goods) are the perfect antidote to the

culture of consumerism. Even if these two small Jain vows of *parigrahaparimana* and *bhogopabhogaparimana* can be practised by all the people irrespective of their caste and creed the eco-sustainability of the future can be ensured.

To stem the tide of violence and hatred - the two dreadful aspects of unsustainability His Holiness Acharya Tulsi - the ninth Acharya of the Jain Svetamber Terapanth Religions Order - launched Anuvrat Movement in 1949. His main aim was to rid society of rampant corruption, communal violence and immorality it was steeped in. Let us first try to understand as to what we mean by ANUVRAT. The word 'ANUVRAT' is a combination of two words 'anu' and 'vrata'. 'anu' means an atom or something that is small or atomic and 'vrata' means a vow. Both these words form the word 'anuvrat' which means a small or atomic vow. Every religious order has a tradition of vratas (vows) but in the Jain tradition two types of vratas (vows) are practised - anuvratas (small or atomic vows) meant for householders and mahavratas (great vows) for ascetics. The word 'anuvrat' was coined by Lord Mahavira who laid down a code of twelve small vows for his shravaks (laymen) and shravikas (laywomen). Though the main aim of the twelve-fold anuvrat code was to promote ethical conduct in society he confined his campaign to his votaries only. The practice of observing these twelve anuvrats among the Jain laity continues even today.

Acharya Tulsi, who was only 34 years old then, was deeply concerned about the decadence of the Indian society. In the wake of the partition of India hundreds of thousands of people were massacred in the name of religion. Millions were rendered homeless. The problem was compounded by the rising trends of greed, selfishness, dishonesty and immorality in society. He was deeply moved by the deplorable plight of the people. The immoral behaviour of the people was causing untold harm to environment and ecology. He took his cue from Lord Mahavira's twelve anuvrats and after a series of consultations evolved a code of modern anuvrats which he thought was useful for all the segments of society, irrespective of caste, colour and creed and gave it the form of a mass movement. It aimed at ridding society of moral filth

which is responsible for all our ills including unsustainable lifestyle. He was well aware that a person could break a law but would not violate a vow if he had taken it. Acharya Tulsi was guided by this human psyche when he embarked upon a unique mission of creating a self-transformation network for a sustainable future.

He rose above narrow sectarian considerations and made anuvrat movement the sole mission of his life. He made it imperative for his monks and nuns too to spread the light of the movement. He traveled on foot all over the country and thousands joined his movement. Anuvrat Movement has already completed 69 years of its existence. It has now spread in all parts of the world. After Acharya Tulsi's death, his successor Acharya Mahapragya kept the flame alive. After his passing away in 2010 his young and dynamic successor Acharya Mahashraman heads the movement now and inspires people to pledge themselves to observe anuvrat code of conduct to eradicate violence, social disparity, poverty and preserve ecological and environmental harmony.

The anuvrat code of conduct designated by Acharya Tulsi consists of eleven small vows which enjoin a person to refrain from senseless and unnecessary violence, aggression, violent agitations, discrimination on grounds of caste, colour, sect and sectarian frenzy. This ethical code restrains his passions that harm society and destroy its eco-sustainability. An anuvrati (one who pledges to abide by anuvrat code of conduct) will observe moral rectitude in business, set limits to the practice of continence and acquisition, abstain from immoral practices and will remain alert towards the problem of environment. He will not cut down trees and will not waste water.

These small vows, as a matter of fact, are a blueprint for an eco-friendly peaceful society. A person who expresses a desire to join the movement can begin with the category of just a supporter and gradually prepare himself to observe all the small vows. In a world torn by strife, hatred, wars, abject poverty and hunger, Anuvrat Movement is a beacon of hope. It shows the way towards a nonviolent future and makes us

realize that both knowledge and wealth increase when we share them with the others.

One of the most popular slogans of anuvrat movement is : *samyamah khalu jeevanam* - self-restraint alone is life. It also shows us the way to a sustainable future. Let us begin from children. They should be inspired to live the good life. I end my speech by quoting the most celebrated eco-philosopher Arne Naes who says - both humans and non-humans should flourish together if we want to ensure eco-sustainability of the future'.

I hope our focus will gradually shift towards non-humans who are diminishing rapidly on account of our wantonness. *anuvrat* is really a roadmap of a sustainable future.

**– Dr. S.L. Gandhi**  
International President  
Anuvrat Global Organization (ANUVIBHA)  
B-402, Nagar Residency  
Main Calgary Road, Malviya Nagar  
Jaipur - 302 017 (Raj.) INDIA  
PH : +91-141-4050991 | 2525829  
(M) : +91-9828016989