

AN ECOLOGICAL REVIEW OF JAINISM

Dr. Rashmi Rekha Goswami

Abstract

Jainism is one of the oldest living religions which formed a vital part of the mainstream of ancient Indian life, contributing greatly to its philosophical, moral, religious, social, artistic and political heritage. The Jaina philosophy is a realistic philosophy which is well-known for its humanistic perspective and therefore its teachings are pertinent in all ages. With the mutual sensitivity towards all kinds of beings, the Jainas have many centuries ago provided a strong voice for the development of eco-friendly behaviour. The moral stance of preservation and sensitization of nature is found in the mainstream of Jaina philosophy. Emphasizing on the observance of *ahimsā* in different realms of life, this system actually boost up the consciousness that all life belong to the same global family and nobody has the right to hurt or harm them. An analysis of the Jaina system from ecological perspective is going to be discussed in this paper.

Key words : ecology, environment, non-violence (*ahimsā*), nature, love, respect

Introduction

In general sense ecology means the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings. 'Ecology' variant as ecology (<Greek *oikos* 'house' and *logos* 'the science', German *ökologie*) is the study of the environment and the life history of organism.¹ Apparently Jainism is a heterodox philosophical school but actually it is an umbrella under which physics, biology, environmental science and many

other vistas of knowledge have been taken shade and shape. It is actually a perfect balance between religion and ethics, between spirituality and equality, between philosophy and humanity. The significance of this system is that it is more about to respect nature than to respect Almighty, it is more about ethical sermons which shapes morality in particular and humanity in general than about formalities to restore spirituality. Jainas have always been very much philanthropic to all kinds of life. Actually it is a natural science or natural philosophy where each and every aspect of nature or physical environment has always been the priority. The simple equation that the destruction of the environment which makes various life-forms possible is the destruction of the planet itself is highly emphasized in the Jaina doctrine. The fundamental ecological principle that the purpose of different life-forms is to help each other is very much reflected in Umāsvatī 'ssūtra' souls (*jīvas*) exists to provide service to each other'.² Grounded on this basic ecological ethics the Jaina philosophy has spread out its eco-friendly sensitivity to embrace all kinds of organisms of nature and becomes the pioneer to speak about self-preservation by preserving nature.

The ecological aspect of Jaina philosophy

The Jaina philosophers can be called as the perfect ecologists. They have minutely observed and studied the nature and its proximity with mankind. Jainas are always ready to look positively with all enthusiasm upon environmental issues. Thus they build a bridge between humanity and environment to execute ecology in philosophy. The environmentalism in Jainism is nothing but a kind of recognition of the inter-connectedness of life-forms. Moreover, it is a positive attitude that educates others to respect and protect living systems. The in-built mechanism of Jainism teaches to share equal love, respect and compassion to all kinds of beings and thus non-violence is highly emphasized here. *Na hanyetnaghātayet* (should not kill and should not cause to kill) is the sum and

substance of Jaina philosophy which is sufficient enough to preserve ecological balance. The *Uttarādhyayanāsūtra* enumerates a long list of living and non-living beings. Umāsvāti categorized life forms according to the number of senses they possess. A very clear description of all kinds of *jīvas* possessing two, three, four or five sense organs is found in the Jaina text. These are technically known as *trasa* in Jaina philosophy.³ Earth, water, fire, air and plant bodies have also been discussed separately. They are described as the one sensed beings possessing only the sense of touch.⁴ The Jaina texts confer equal status to all beings either of five-sensed or one-sensed as they deserve the same kind of moral consideration. In the list of living beings the Jainas have categorically mentioned about the *vanaspati* because *vanaspati* also breathes, nourishes its body and sustains life in its body. The value of trees and their right to sustain without facing any kind of harm from mankind is highly emphasized in the *Ācāraṅgāsūtra*.⁵ The scope of the living entities is from a subtle, tiny microbe up to the animals having huge size. The total numbers of all *trasasthāvara-sukṣma-paryāpta-aparyāpta* and other kind of living beings can be said as innumerable. According to Jaina philosophy it is our moral duty to love and respect all these forms of life as all kinds of *jīvas* feel equal amount of pains through the sense of touch. Harlold Coward said in this connection, 'To harm any aspect of nature-be it air, water, plants or animals-is tantamount to harming oneself. The fact that such an ethic has not protected South-Asia from the environmental problems of modern industry and agriculture suggests that it has not been sufficiently understood and applied.'⁶

According to Jaina philosophy the ethic of care should be extended to the entire biotic community, engendering an awareness of and sensitivity to the precious nature of life. This results in restoring the positive karmic account for oneself. That means preserving all living forms is equal to self-preservation. Adoption of a non-violent lifestyle will ultimately free a person from all karmic entanglements and at the final stage of sanctity; one

ascends to the realm of perfection (*siddha-loka*) wherein one dwells eternally. In Jaina philosophy the world is described in terms of a cosmic woman whose body contains countless *jīvas* that reincarnate repeatedly until the rare attainment of spiritual liberation *kevala*. The form of the Universe (*lokākāśa*) in Jaina scriptures is described as a dancing doll or a man standing with legs apart and arm resting on his waist. Thus the universe is shaped as a human being with three parts- upper, middle and lower.⁷ According to Jainism, the universe (*lokākāśa*) is divided into three parts.⁸

1. The upper Universe (*urddhaloka*)
2. The middle Universe (*madhyaloka*)
3. The lower Universe (*adholoka*)

The upper world is occupied by celestial beings. The *siddhas* or the liberated souls live at the top of the universe. Human, animals, plants, astral bodies and some heavenly beings occupy the middle world while the hellish beings reside in the lower world. The primary means to attain freedom requires the active non-harming of living beings that ultimately frees one from all karmic engagements that keep one bound. Jainas adhere to the vows of non-violence to purify their *karmas* that helps to advent towards the higher states of spiritual attainment which will ultimately lead to *siddhasthāna* (*urddhaloka*).⁹ The Jaina texts discussed five types of vows (*mahāvratā*) to be observed in lifetime which includes *ahiṃsā*.¹⁰ Here it is said that not to cause violence etc. physically, mentally or verbally by oneself as well as not to support or approve it when done by others is *mahāvratā*.¹¹ Jaina texts clearly recognized non-violence as the non-harmful activities to living beings.¹² Thus they are very sensitive towards each and every living entities of nature. According to them there can't be any hierarchy of *hiṃsā* or sliding scale of spiritual harm in respect of higher and lower class of beings. The Jaina philosophy acknowledges *ahiṃsā* as one of the division of *dharma* also.¹³ That means the observance of non-

violence is also a kind of righteousness for Jaina philosophers. Therefore, they perform non-violence as their moral responsibility which promotes the benefit of others along with themselves.

The solution to get rid of the ecological hazard of present century has been given by Jaina teachers centuries ago by adopting a clear perception towards existence. Existence according to them itself is very complex, subtle and many sided (*anekānta*). Drawing a conclusive remark without having the proper many-sided knowledge of reality which is technically known as *naya*¹⁴ in Jaina philosophy can be destructive enough as it is based on limited and biased perspective. Any action based on this type of one-sided knowledge is always harmful to one-self as well as to others. Therefore Umāsvati says, 'A person with a deluded world-view is like an insane person who follows arbitrary whims and can't distinguish true from false.'¹⁵ The *anekāntavāda* (different spectrum to see the reality) of Jainism provides an ontological basis for the principle of non-violence. According to Jainism our actions are always rooted in one-sided ideological dogmatism and the underlying awareness is always considered as the absolute truth but actually it is partially true and that is the main reason of sufferings for one-self in particular and for the whole ecology in general. Thus cultivating a broad / many-sided outlook with moral sensitivity and responsibility along with the deep sense of non-violence can definitely be the great source of relief for ecological imbalance. Claims from one perspective must always be balanced and complemented by claims from other perspectives. This has important ecological implications, for it legitimizes considerations from non-human perspective, enabling us to consider the effects of our actions on non-human life forms and environment.¹⁶ The *nayavāda* of Jainism can be stated as the method of reconciling opposites and avoiding violence, making it an attractive basis for ecological thought and practice. John Cort says that intellectual non-violence is implicit in *anekāntavāda*, a view he calls intellectual *ahimsā*.¹⁷

Jaina philosophy has always laid much emphasis on vegetation because nature with the help of vegetation creates a serene atmosphere suitable for a happy and healthy life. In the *Prajāpanasūtra* (1.37) many kinds of shrubs are described that are useful for mankind. In many passages of the *Aupapātikadaśāsūtra* lots of examples are given that extol unpolluted atmosphere which is fundamental right of vegetation world. Thus the Jaina teachers and followers are very careful about their food. Jainism protests against the eradication of animal and vegetable kingdom. Earth is the only context for human flourishing. So it is a common human responsibility to respond and respect all kinds of beings living around nature because it is the only way to maintain a serene and calm atmosphere both inward and outward. Thus the keen interest of Jainism is to protect the nature and to retrieve the ecological imbalance.

Conclusion

The emerging trend of the present century is the promotion of the sensitive issues of environmental degradation and its protection. Jaina philosophy with its powerful ethics can definitely be a great assistance for the contemporary ecological emergency. The very simple idea of Jaina philosophy that the only way to save one's own soul requires the protection of all other possible souls is very relevant in present day society. The Jaina vow of *aparigraha* is very useful in this context because at the present ecological crisis what one needs is the basic change in one's attitude. One's needs shall be satisfied if one has less and less greed. *Aparigraha* suggests limiting one's wants voluntarily¹⁸. Commenting upon the present ecological calamity the Chief Justice of India, S A Bobde on 22nd February, 2020 has said in the International Judge's Conference in New Delhi that 'Environmental issues can't be hindered by national and international borders. Water and wind flows seamlessly across the earth and even under it. The growth of vegetation affects animals and man, and a man affects both.

Perhaps there is the greatest need for single system of laws in this regard. It is said that human beings are seeds as well as parasites to the earth. We take much more than give back to the earth.¹⁹ This type of moral approach or concern towards nature was echoed centuries ago in Jaina texts. The present century's ecological catastrophe is tried to be cover up by ecologists by adopting several means. Jadav Payeng of Assam created history in this aspect by nurturing nature single handed. His only target is to protect the environment. Michael Tobias released a film 'Ahimsā' in 1988 which elegantly portrays several Jaina leaders and extols the religion as the great champion of animal rights and non-violence to other livings. He also wrote a book 'Life Force: The World of Jainism' where a chapter on Jaina ecology has been included. Thus the Jaina system can be designated as an approach to love, respect, protect and save the nature for a balanced eco-system and for a healthy and happy life.

References :

1. Foreword, JAE
2. TS, V. 21
3. dvīndriyādayastrasāḥ, JSD, III. 5
4. Ibid, III.4
5. AS, II.4.2, 11-12
6. cf. Lance, E. Nelson (ed.), *Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, pp. 39-40
7. YSR, IV.103-6
8. Ibid, Uttaradhyayanasūtra, Chap. XIX, XXXVI
9. muktyanantaramekasamayādurdhamgacchantyālokāntāt, JSD, V. 23
10. Ibid, VI. 7

11. manovākkāyākṛtakāritānumatyāhimsā-asatya-asteya-abrahma-parigrahebhoviratirmahāvratam, Ibid, VI.7
12. prāṇānāmanatipātaḥapramādaovāhimsā, Ibid, VI.8
13. Ibid, VIII.3-5
14. anirākṛtetarāmśovastvaṁśagrāhīpratipatturabhiprāyonayaḥ, Ibid, IX.3
15. TS, I.32
16. JAE, p. 20
17. cf. Moore, A. Charles (ed.), *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 50, No. 3, pp. 324-347
18. mamatvavisarjanamaparigrahaḥ, JSD,VI.12
19. Assam Tribune, 23rd February, 2020, p. 3

Abbreviation with Bibliography :

Original Works :

1. *Ācāraṅgasūtra* (AS), ed. by H. Jecobi, 1882, Pali Text Society, London.
2. *Ācāraṅgasūtra* (AS), illustrated by S. Bothra, (two volumes), Padma Prakasan, Delhi.
3. *Jaina Siddhānta Dīpikā* (JSD) of Ācārya Tulsi, ed. and trans. by Muni Nathmol, 1955, Adarsa Sahitya Sangha Prakasan, Delhi.
4. *Tattvārthādhigamasūtra* (TS) of Umāśvatī, August, 1932, Srimad Rajachandra Ashrama, Delhi.
5. *Tattvārthādhigamāsūtra* (TS) of Umāśvatī, trans. by J.L. Jaini, 1920, The Central Jaina Publishing House, Arrah, India.
6. *Yogaśāstra* (YSR) of Ācārya Homachandra, ed. by Gopani, A.S. Surendra Bathara, 1989, Prakrit Bharati Academy, Jaipur.

Modern Works :

1. Chapple, Key Christopher, (ed.) *Jainism & Ecology Nonviolence in the web of life* (JAE), Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2006.
2. Mehta, Mohanlal, *Outlines of Jaina Philosophy*, Bangalore, Jaina Mission Society, 1954
3. Misra, R.P, (ed.) *Environmental Ethics A Dialogue of Cultures*, New Delhi, Concept Publishing Company, 1995
4. Moore, A. Charles (ed.), *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 50, No. 3, University of Hawaii Press, 2000.
5. Lance, E. Nelson (ed.), *Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, Albany, University of New York Press, 1998.