

SPECIAL FEATURES

Jainism and Environmental Ethics

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Jainism stands on the premise that all life forms, from humans to microscopic organisms, are interconnected and equally deserving of respect. This belief, combined with the principle of *ahimsā* (non-violence), predisposes Jainism to the contemporary concept of environmental ethics and encourages Jains to partake in actions beneficial to all in order to minimize karmic bondage—the vices trapping the soul in the cycle of birth and death.

Since the 1980s, India's air pollution, water quality, and waste management have ranked among the worst in the world. To combat this dire, unprecedented situation, many Jain leaders were called upon to offer insight on the mitigation of ecological disasters. These scholars declared that a shift in human behavior was necessary to curb the negative effects of industrialization, emphasizing the importance of resisting consumerism and engaging in modest living. As per the doctrine of non-possessiveness (*aparigraha*), Jains are urged to restrict themselves to minimal possessions and to renounce attachments. This practice targets the root cause of environmental degradation: overconsumption. Gaining control over the five senses is integral to curtailing the overuse and misuse of resources, independent of availability and fleeting pleasures. This ideology is evident in deeply-rooted Jain dietary choices such as vegetarianism and veganism, which create an understanding of how immoderation often harms the most vulnerable—both in nature and in society. For instance, overindulgence in wealthier, more developed countries has not only depleted ecosystems, but also exacerbated the pre-existing struggles of the marginalized in the Global South, who are forced to bear the brunt of climate change despite contributing the least to its causes. Jainism critiques this cycle by urging its followers to embrace simplicity and sufficiency rather than vanity and grandeur.

Jainism's commitment to the doctrine of multiple perspectives, *anekāntavāda*, teaches that no single viewpoint can encompass the entire truth, communicating nature's complexity. As pertaining to environmental issues, it encourages the integration of diverse attitudes to create holistic solutions to global challenges. In the status quo, societies are gradually initiating a shift away from nonrenewables (e.g. coal, natural gas) towards renewable energy sources (e.g. hydropower, solar panels) as a means to attenuate greenhouse gas emissions. Though this method may initially seem foolproof, it opens the door for other adverse drawbacks: habitat disruption, community displacement, noise pollution, etc. At the point at which humanity continues

attempting to produce such large quantities of energy and other consumable goods, it will always be confined to choosing between the lesser of two evils. Acknowledging the interdependence of all life forms, Jains inspire society to act with care and moderation, serving as an important reminder in today's world of excessive consumption and unsustainability.

In Jain philosophy, spiritual progress is intertwined with one's interactions with the world, opposing the false dichotomy between individual liberation and collective well-being. By minimizing harm to others through sustainability and equity, Jains advance both personal and societal transformation simultaneously. It is this integrated vision that makes Jain teachings relevant to the modern goals of creating a just, egalitarian society.

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