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## *Jainism: Culture & Religion for a Sustainable Future*

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### THE HISTORY OF JAINISM

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Jainism is one of the oldest religions which came into existence and developed on Indian soil with a profound progressive attitude and judicious understanding of special requirements and philosophical findings and necessities of the life. It has most non-violent approaches and humanitarian view point towards all creatures. The goal of Jainism is to realize the soul's true nature. From archaeological remains, we know that Jainism provided among the first monumental art beginning in the third century BCE, with images of the *jina* predating those of the Buddha.<sup>1</sup>

Jainism is a representative of the *Śramaṇa* tradition, which was a non-Vedic movement parallel to the historical Vedic religion.<sup>2</sup> The *Śramaṇa* tradition was responsible for the related concepts of *samsāra* (cycle of birth and death) and *mokṣa* (liberation).<sup>3</sup> Jains traditionally trace their history through twenty-four propagators of faith known as *tirthankara* (fordmakers). The lineage of these *tirthankara* begins with Rishabha and ends with Mahavira. Jainism dates to the 6th century BCE in India. The presence of Jain tradition in the earliest period of Indian history is supported by many scholars. It strongly suggests that Jainism existed in pre-Aryan time. The early geographer Megasthenes (*circa* 350-290 BCE) notes that the Garmanes (Jains) "live in forests, subsisting on leaves and wild fruits... abstaining from wine and the delights of love... women as well as men study philosophy." From the dating of the *acaranga sutra* at 300 BCE or earlier<sup>4</sup> and lists of lineages within this text that go back several generations, it can be surmised that the Jain tradition began to take shape as early as the eighth century BCE, making it one of the world's oldest continuously practiced

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religious traditions.

The religion derives its name from the *jinās* ("conquerors"), a title given to twenty-four great teachers (*tirthankaras* or "ford-makers"), through whom their faith was revealed. Mahavira, the last of the *tirthankaras*, is considered the founder of Jainism. The ultimate goal of Jainism the liberation of the self (*jiva*) from rebirth, which is attained through the elimination of accumulated karma (the consequences of previous actions). All twenty four *tirthankaras* are considered to be the creator of Jain religion. They have attained all the achievement of ultimate nature including the ultimate knowledge after making vigorous efforts. Their principles are for betterment and welfare for others. Their path is to provide total fearless life and that of non-violence and to distribute love and friendship. *Tirthankaras* religious teachings form the basis for Jain canons.

### **Jainism and Environmental Ethics**

The religious traditions of India are rich and various, offering diverse theological and practical perspectives on the human condition. Religious, spiritual and cultural tradition can contribute to a great extent for the protection of environmental improvement. Jainism is not only a religion but way of life. It is art of living. Jainism, though a part of Vedic tradition, presents its different philosophy on man and nature relationship. Jainism stresses the interrelatedness of life forms through a biocosmology, emphasizes nonviolence and truth, and includes a commitment to minimize harm to all living things. Both religions are interpreted with an eco-friendly perspective.<sup>5</sup>

Jainism accepts that every soul whether of a man or of a mono sensed insect is autonomous and independent. It believes in the presence of soul not only in animate ones like human beings, animal, insects but in inanimate thing also which are deemed as non-living by others like water, air, fire, earth.

The Jain tradition which enthroned the philosophy of ecological harmony and non violence as its lodestar flourished for centuries side by side with other schools of thought in ancient India. It formed a vital part of the mainstream of ancient Indian life, contributing greatly to its philosophical, artistic and political heritage. The ecological philosophy of Jainism 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 twenty four *Jinas* or *tirthankaras* (Path finder's) of

this era whose example and teachings have been its living legacy through the millennia.

The protection of environment is a global issue and it is not an isolated problem of any area or nation. It concerns all countries irrespective of their size, and level of development. Jain sacred texts have large volumes that point to environment. Jainism attaches greatest importance to environmental concern. Lord Risabh Nath, first *tirthankar* of Jains laid down sound principles in ancient India for the preservation of environment and the maintenance of ecological equilibrium. The concept of sustainable development is well built in daily cultural routine of Jains. Jainism provides positive response for sustainable environmental development and there is need to propagate such basic environmental values of Jain traditions without any further delay. Jainism lays down its unique concept for the protection of our environment and for the maintenance of ecological equilibrium of the universe. The Jain way of life is very ethical and it also respects and honors the earth and the environment. Jain culture can play a key role in economic development that enables people to live happily, without any tension and in harmony with others in the community and with nature. We must design such economic development which takes care of cultural patterns and cultural sensibilities.

The goal within Jainism is to ascend to the *Siddha Loka*, a world beyond heaven and earth, where all the liberated souls dwell eternally in a state of energy, consciousness, and bliss. Although this goal utterly removes one from all worldly entanglements, the path to reach this highest attainment entails great care in regard to how one lives in relationship to all the other living beings that surround one in the earthly realm. Hence, from the aspect of practice, Jainism holds some interesting potential for ecological thinking, though its final goal transcends earthly (or earthy) concerns.

### **Jain Ethics in Practice**

At the core of Jain faith lays five vows that govern the daily life of Jain laypersons, monks, and nuns. These five vows, which inspired and influenced Mahatma Gandhi, are nonviolence (*ahimsa*), truthfulness (*satya*), not stealing (*asteya*), sexual restraint (*brahmacarya*), and non possession (*aparigraha*). One adheres to these vows in order to minimize harm to all possible life-forms. In Jainism, life is arranged hierarchically according to

the number of senses a particular form possesses. For instance, life particles (*jiva*) in earth, water, fire, air, microorganisms, and plants each experience the world through the sense of touch. Worms add the sense of taste. The Jainas are particularly well-suited to reconsider their tradition in an ecological light, particularly because of their history of advocacy against meat eating and animal sacrifice, as well as their success at developing business areas that avoid overt violence. However, some challenges remain. One expression of environmentalism involves tree planting projects. Though Jaina lay people might participate in such activities, their nuns and monks most likely would not plant trees because of the harm caused to the earth in the digging process. Foot travel is severely curtailed during the rainy season, following Mahavira's example, because of the increased insect population during those four months. No furs, plumes or silk are worn. Food is eaten during the day, since there is too much danger of injuring insects in cooking at night. Another expression of environmentalism in India has been to establish forest preserves on property surrounding Jaina temple sites. Jainism had been a staunch worshipper and protector of nature since its inception. Jain tradition considers ecology as an indispensable part of spirituality and life. It prepared the environmental ethics with religious and health grounds and inspired its followers to safeguard the ecological perspective. There has been paramount importance of mountains, rivers, trees and other natural resources in Jain cosmology. Jain *tirthankaras* and *acharyas* had received their spiritual attainment penancing under trees, above the mountains and on the bank of rivers. These natural resources have been engraved as sacred ones in Jaina art and architecture.

*Tirth Kshetras* exist far away from the noise of cities in forests or on hills in peaceful environment, so the mind of a man being free from tension & trouble gets engaged in worship of god and in self-realization. In hill areas, atmosphere is very peaceful and it is seen as appropriate place for meditation and asceticism. Jain meditation has been the central practice of spirituality in Jainism along with the three jewels. Meditation in Jainism aims at realizing the self, attain salvation, and take the soul to complete freedom. It is also method by which one can develop an attitude of harmony and respect towards other humans and nature.

Ahimsa is the concept of non-violence, the injunction of not harming living beings. It is one of the foremost doctrines of

Jainism. It has emerged from the doctrine of the equality of all souls. It grew from the belief in reincarnation: a person might come back in the form of an animal or insect, no living creature ought ever to be harmed. Jain lay persons are enjoined to engage in occupations that are not associated with violence and/or destruction of life, and follow a vegetarian diet. Jainism's all-encompassing ethical principle can be summarized as follows: Do your duty, and do it as humanely as you can - not just toward other Jains nor even all humankind, but toward the entire world.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVITIES

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Protection and preservation of the environment is a prime requirement of the Jain faith.

1. Environment Day and Nature Reserve - As a follow-up to the Jain declaration on nature, Institute of Jainology facilitated the first Jain Environment Day in 1992 organized by the Oshwal Yuvak Sangh. Over a thousand people representing all age groups attended. This day also saw the launch of the nature reserve within the 08 acre grounds of ancient forest and meadowland at the Oshwal Centre in Hertfordshire, UK.

2. Ahimsa Environment Award for Business & Community - In 1993 a new phase in environmental education program was begun with the establishment of the *ahimsa* environment award for achievements by both Jain businesses and community groups in the UK in adopting 'good Jain practices'. These practices refer to the ethics applied in running a business or operating as a community group with particular reference to environmental friendliness, consideration for the welfare of staff or members, honesty and transparency in all dealings, and so forth. Representatives from the body shop, the WWF, and the national council for voluntary organizations' environment unit judged the applicants. The first awards were made in 1994 at a dinner attended by more than 300 people, including members of other faiths and organizations.

3. Greening of Palitana - Plans to reforest the hills around Palitana in India, the largest Jain pilgrimage site in the world, were begun with small-scale tree planting during 1997. It is hoped that when the project is developed further, a permanent exhibition will to be set up at Palitana to demonstrate the relationship between Jain beliefs and environmental practices.

## Jainism and its Approach towards Sustainability

Sustainability refers to racing with time at nearly same pace without much crest and trough. So sustainable development is the sustainability of co-opposites in balanced manner in the race with time. World's economies have always been busy in planning the strategy for wealth maximization to hold the supreme status. Jainism's life style can serve as a feasible solution package to convert the road blocks of sustainability into the steeping stones by nurturing the confidence and atmosphere for peaceful survival. Jainism is a life style of values, which is alternative to the ideology of consumer society. Its philosophy educates, trains and motivate the life style to limit the strive for power and desires within the circumscribe of availability. "Resources are scared but means to put them are unlimited." Jain philosophy captures this pulse of reality and frames the life style to restrict the means of utilization. Excess utilization of water, food, clothes and other resources is considered as causing or indulging in violence. Jain ascetic follow the principle of equal distribution of resources very religiously.

The application of Mahavira's economy based on the self-restraint coincide the moral spirituality with utility economics to give the solutions for the emerging global problems. One of the most important features of Jainism is its strong sense of community. Jainism's ancient advocacy of vegetarianism is receiving global attention due to severe food shortages and to the researches of the scientific community. Vegetarianism is the only viable answer to world hunger, given the scarcity of resources. Jainism depicts a lot about climate change issue issues that take place in future and suggested to act reasonably for sustainable development. The *Bhagwati Sutra* discusses on environment issues. Jain life style has been discussed in the climate change conference, Copenhagen (COP-15). It shows social way to protect environment and stop global warming. As more and more people adopt Jain life style will help reducing green house gases and carbon emissions which causes global warming. United Nations has declared this year as "International Year of Water Cooperation" but when we go through our history, we find that in Jain principles give special emphasis to minimum and logical use of natural resources and environment protection.

## CONCLUSION

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It is most essential to promise the nature conservation and environment protection for sustainable and equitable development of our society and our nation. Mankind is destroying the environment at such a rate that nature can no longer fight back alone and replenish it. As Jainism give emphasis on non-violence (*ahimsa*) and environment protection, the life and teaching of the *tirthankaras* and Jain ethics can play a major role for universal peace and prosperity, which is the demand of the age. The Jain ethics and principles have shown one of the great ecological paths towards global sustainability, and by all indications this path is being followed by more and more people.

Thus Jainism comprises right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct. It is manifest as non possession, non absolutism, and nonviolence. Right knowledge frees one from absolutism and enables one to see things with a liberal and open mind, the discovery of the oneness of all living beings leads to nonviolent conduct. The centrality of *ahimsa* to Jain ethics makes it truly global; its practitioners are world citizens. The most important aspect of its application is that it can be practiced by person of any religion without deviating from their religious practices. The five fundamental teachings of Jainism and the five fold Jain code of conduct offer world today a time tested anchor of moral imperatives and a viable route plan for humanity's common pilgrimage for holistic environmental protection, peace and harmony in the world. However, the philosophy and doctrine followed by all Jains is identical and it is a kind of heritage attributes for the welfare of mankind. In 21<sup>st</sup> century when we are thinking for a sustainable development and sustainable tourism, the Jain ethics and teaching can be of more use for better long term plans.

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