

“Ecology, Jainism and the Human Imagination”

By Michael Tobias and Jane Gray Morrison

In this essay Tobias and Morrison provide a very brief overview of the Jain environmental orientation in terms of its relevancy to current global ecological issues.

The complex pantheon of Jain art, ethics and spiritual tradition describes a paradise, not in some remote “heaven” but in the very heaven that is Earth. For thousands of years, Jain traditions and temperament have consistently addressed the possibility for ecological reconciliation and ultimate redemption. These impulses are more relevant today than ever before. The reason is clear: we find ourselves caught out in the very middle of the worst extinction spasm in 65 million years. What makes the Jain contribution to ecological crises so imperative is that it stems expressly from human intention and the responsibility that intention implies.

Reigning doctrines of Jain tradition focus upon that which is most ecological of all: a light human footprint in the guise of the all-encompassing **ahimsa**, non-intervention or non-violence; **aparigraha**, non-possession; **moksha marg**, the path of purification to enlightenment; **anekant**, tolerance and non-absolutism; and **satya**, truth in all dealings. The collective energies of these callings have harbored stunning revelations, evident not only in Jain art and architecture but - most importantly - in the driving forces of an ancient vegetarian community that is global, vibrant and dedicated to peace. Peace itself might well be equated with non-violence and, hence, ecological integrity.

But Jain doctrine and practice go well beyond the integrity that many nations might consider acceptable according to environmental indicators. While GDP (Gross Domestic Product) figures as a conventional benchmark for progress among nations, the Columbia University/World Economic Forum Environmental Performance Index (EPI), produced by the Yale University Center for Environmental Law and Policy, establishes benchmarks for protection of major biomes within each country. At least 10% of a country must be protected under these benchmarks and these protected areas are part of a sanctuary movement worldwide that, to date, has protected 12% of the terrestrial earth, though a mere 1% of the marine environment. Protection itself - which conservationists have been advocating since the days of Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant (with the safeguarding of California sequoias and the creation of the first national park at Yellowstone) - comports magnificently with the ancient Jain traditions of **panjorapors** (animal sanctuaries), of interdependency and personal responsibility.

In 2008, India ranked 13th on the aforementioned Environmental Protection Index, the U.S. 7th. Sweden ranked number one. These rankings are ambiguous, to be sure. But were an equivalent index of environmental impact to examine communities specifically, I suspect

the Jain aggregate might well be number one in the world, given their traditional aversions to industries that destroy nature and their refusal to engage in practices of animal agriculture or personal consumption of animal products. Even Mahayana Buddhist Bhutan, with its population of 630,000, is only 15% vegetarian, according to recent data, although that country's Gross National Happiness Index has injected a fantastic ingredient of environmental conservation, personal satisfaction, ethical jurisprudence, good governance and indigenous spirituality into the formulas for extrapolating what a successful country really means in the modern world.

The 24th Jain Tirthankara, Lord Mahavira, himself lived at a time of ecological crisis within India and the landscape of his ascetical wanderings across the sub-continent was not unlike the world of burdens shared by Gandhi, or by today's 1.1 billion Indians. In fact, India contains portions of three of the world's 35 terrestrial biological "hotspots" - areas containing the most number of native (endemic) endangered species, including the Western Ghats, the foothills of the Himalayas, and portions of the states of Meghalaya, Manipur and Mizoram. Fragmentation of habitat across all of India, mirrored by the tragic loss of most viable tiger populations and the near extinction of the Gir Lion, are conditions best described as engendering an ecological war zone with poaching and the illegal harvesting of timber being a direct response to poverty. In the United States, Hawaii has been called the "capital of extinctions," having seen half of its known 140, or so, birds go extinct. There, it was not poverty, ignorance and high levels of consumption that caused such biologic havoc but, rather, introduced non-native predators.

Conditions for farm animals in India are dreadful, but no more so than in most nations of the world, where approximately 50 billion (in addition to another 30 billion or more fish) are slaughtered annually for human consumption. The Jain model of non-violence could not strike a more powerful and iconic antidote to this crisis which is sweeping the planet. Indeed, by scientific consensus as much as 60% of all life forms on earth may well go extinct by mid-century if current consumption trends continue. That's 60% of as many as a 100 million species, each harboring millions of individuals. While the average American is consuming 125 kilograms of meat per year - with many of those animals reared on cleared rain forest - a vegetarian diet actually saves at least one acre of rain forest each year. Data from the Eastern Ecuadorian Amazon in the late 1990s showed that as many as 30,000 to 60,000 species may be native to any one acre of rain forest. A single South American termite nest has been shown to contain approximately 3 million individuals and in Pennsylvania, one acre of land was found to host 425 million creatures.¹ After all the math is computed, it turns out that one individual who refrains from eating other creatures and pursues a path of deliberate non-violence may actually save billions upon billions of life forms.

The Jain spiritual impetus towards this goal of non-violence connotes a thrilling connectivity, outlined magnificently in the *Acaranga Sutra* and is best summarized by the statement, “That which you consider worth killing is like yourself. The result of actions by you has to be borne by you, so do not destroy anything.”² Additionally, this theme resonates throughout the illustrated *Uttaradhyayanastura* and *Kalpastura*; in Kundakunda’s masterpiece, the *Moksha Pahuda*; in the Jain *Yatra* paintings of nature spirits; and in one motif in particular, that of the *samavasarana*. This theme of a *Jina*, or some ascetic convening an Edenic assembly of creatures is at the essence of the ongoing Jain dialogue with nature. It is embodied in the sculpted Jain mendicant, Gommatesvara Bahubali, son of the first Tirthankara, standing in peaceful meditation (*khadgasana*), his legs covered in vines with ant piles forming at his feet. The image resembles and evokes similar underlying impulses of joy and interdependency between species from other traditions, such as the Christian Saint Francis addressing a gathering of birds.

Like other traditional communities, Jains are confronted with assimilation, but what may well separate the Jain response to the 21st century from that of others, is its historic association of the well-being of humans with the well-being of all other creatures. There could be no more appropriate environmental maxim than this all-encompassing conviction that we are connected to all of life and must search our hearts and collective heritage to ensure that we follow the goodwill of our virtuous, altruistic intentions and beliefs. The Jain community has shown one of the great ecological paths towards global sustainability, and by all indications this path is being followed by more and more people.

1. See “Number of Insects (Species and Individuals),” www.si.edu/Encyclopedia_SI/nmnh/buginfo/bugnos.htm

2. *The Jaina Sutras*, Hermann Jacobi translator, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884. Surendra Bothra, *Ahimsa: The Science of Peace*, Jaipur: Prakrit Bharati Academy, 3rd edition, 2008.

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