



Jain Philosophy and the Roots of Sustainability

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Abstract:

We keep buying more, wasting more, and telling ourselves it can't go on like this — and yet it does, year after year, while ecosystems get thinner and the gap between rich and poor keeps stretching (Kurenlahti, 2018). This isn't really a story about one bad policy. It's about what we've assumed, for a very long time, nature is owed. This paper looks at Jainism — a tradition that goes back to the Śramaṇa movement, roughly 800 to 600 BCE — as a way into that problem. Prof. M. Katarnikar names three of its central ideas the "Trinity of Jainism": Anekāntavāda, Ahimsā, Aparigraha. It see the first as a discipline of humility, which has a direct bearing on how people relate to each other; the second as a biocentric ethic, based on the concept of jīva and the idea that all living things are mutually sustaining; the third as the actual root of what sustainable consumption would mean, if we took it seriously. None of this arrived as damage control after an ecological crisis. It grew out of a way of seeing the world that never put humans at the top to begin with. I also don't skip past the obvious objection — that these vows, taken absolutely, would grind an industrial economy to a halt. Mahāvīra's own split between the Mahāvratas and the Anuvratas answers that, and it's worth taking seriously: Jainism never asked for perfection. Just restraint.

Keywords: Jainism, Anekāntavāda, Ahimsā, Aparigraha, Jīva, Sustainability

1. Introduction

Most of it comes from an old, fairly simple, desire: people want a way of life that means something and doesn't self-destruct. The wish feels more acute now than it did before, as consumer culture has spread and cost us so much (Kurenlahti, 2018). Over the last hundred years or so consumption has increased faster than anyone really planned for. Industrialisation, mass production, advertising that makes a want feel like a need. We called it advancement. In some ways it was. But it also left behind thinner ecosystems, depleted resources and a growing divide between people, and at some point the question becomes unavoidable: can this continue?

Part of the answer sits underneath the technology question. It's in what we assume about how humans relate to everything else that's alive. A stripped hillside or an oil spill isn't just a physical event — it says something about how we've come to picture nature: what it's for, whether it has any worth beyond what we can pull out of it. There's a word for that assumption — anthropocentrism — the idea that humans sit at the moral centre of things and everything else is basically there to serve us. You can see it in law, where rivers get treated as property rather than as anything with standing of its own. You can see it in economics, where a forest gets priced by its timber and not its life. You can see it in ordinary shopping habits that mostly do not ask what the cost was upstream. Climate change and the slow extinction of species are not just bad luck. They are what you would expect from a civilisation that has spent a long time treating the living world as raw material, and calling that progress.

Jainism grew out of exactly this kind of concern, though it's a good deal older than most traditions still practised today. It traces back to the Śramaṇa movement, which took shape in ancient India somewhere between 800 and 600 BCE, offering a real alternative to the Brahmanical orthodoxy of the time. Jainism, Buddhism, and the now-extinct Ājīvika school all came out of that period, and between them they gave Indian philosophy some of its most enduring ideas — karma, saṃsāra, mokṣa. One thing worth clearing up: Mahāvīra didn't start Jainism. He was the last of twenty-four Tīrthaṅkaras, coming long after the first, Ṛṣabhadeva. He lived around the same time as the Buddha and gave the tradition depth, not origin.

Why does any of this matter for an environmental argument? Because most Western environmental philosophy has had to fight against the grain of its own tradition to get anywhere. Kant thought rational beings — humans, in practice — are ends in themselves, with the rest of nature reduced to a means. Aristotle believed plants exist for animals and animals for humans. Genesis commands humans to have dominion. Later thinkers, like Peter Singer, Paul Taylor and Arne Naess, tried to push the circle of moral concern outwards, but that is largely a twentieth century project, built after the damage was already visible, tacking a moral framework onto a civilisation whose basic assumptions had already done the harm. Jainism got to a genuinely non-anthropocentric ethics roughly two and a half thousand years before that, and not as a response to catastrophe. It just followed from what the tradition had always believed life was. Anekāntavāda, Ahimsā, and Aparigraha aren't three separate rules stacked next to each other — they lean on one another. Katarnikar's own line sums it up: these three "have come out as a Trinity of Jainism for the surrounding world" (2018).

What follows works through that Trinity one at a time — Anekāntavāda first, because everything else depends on it, then Ahimsā together with the metaphysics of jīva, then Aparigraha. After that, I take the objection head-on and look at how the Mahāvratā/Anuvratā distinction keeps these ideas usable rather than merely ideal.

2. Anekantavada and Social Harmony

Start with Anekāntavāda, since it's the ground everything else stands on. Before anyone can practise restraint toward the earth, or real compassion toward other beings, they need to know the world honestly — without assuming they already see more of it than they do. Jain philosophy holds that any object carries countless aspects, and no single statement gets the whole of it. These aspects aren't just concepts we lay over a thing from outside. They actually belong to it. The trouble is that a judgement can only take in some of those aspects and misses the rest by default. Syādvāda — the epistemological half of the same idea — follows naturally: an ordinary person knows part of something at any given time, not the whole, and that keeps human confidence from running too far ahead of itself.

This is better than an argument, as the old parable of the blind men and the elephant has it. One man feels the trunk, another the leg, another the tail, and each is sure that he now knows what an elephant is. Snake, fan, rope. Each willing to defend his answer. None of them is exactly incorrect. Neither is right, not entirely. Here's a way to think of it: The same thing happens with people's view of society. An economist looks at a forest and sees board-feet and land value; a community that has lived beside that forest for generations sees an entire way of life. They both are touching something real. Both confuse the part for the whole.

That matters on two fronts this paper keeps circling back to — how we treat each other, and how we treat the world. A lot of social conflict, like the pressure consumer culture puts on the environment, comes down to rigidity: competing doctrines, each sure it holds the entire truth. Anekāntavāda asks for basic respect toward other beliefs, since nobody sees the whole elephant. In India especially, where so many traditions live side by side, that's less a nicety than something close to a precondition — you can hear it in the constitutional guarantees around free speech (Article 19) and secularism (Article 25).

The same humility carries over to nature. Once you accept that the human vantage point only ever grasps part of the picture, the old assumption — that human need automatically outranks everything else — starts to look like exactly the partial judgement the parable warns against. Water looks like a resource from where we stand. From where a fish stands, it's the whole of life. So Anekāntavāda isn't just about tolerating other people's opinions. It's the first move toward Ahimsā — because a mind willing to admit it hasn't touched the whole elephant is already halfway to asking what harm it's doing to the parts it hasn't touched.

3. Jiva: Life as the Ground of Moral Worth

Ahimsā needs an answer to a basic question first: who actually counts? Jain metaphysics answers through jīva — soul, the bare fact of consciousness. Jīva counts as dravya, substance, and the tradition holds there are infinite jīvas filling the universe. Souls are eternal; consciousness is what defines them, and that's what keeps soul distinct from body even while the two stay bound together under karma. In its natural condition, a soul is said to be perfect, complete. It's only ignorance that makes it mistake itself for matter. The classification here is precise, almost fussy. Souls are either liberated (mukta) or still caught in the cycle (saṃsārī), shaped by whatever karma they've generated. One-sensed beings (ekendriya) have only touch — earth-bodied, water-bodied, fire-bodied, air-bodied beings, plus all plant life, right down to nigoda, a form of vegetable life so minute that countless souls share a single body. Two-sensed beings add taste. Three-sensed add smell. Four-sensed add sight. Five-sensed add hearing — fish, birds, the familiar mammals most people already assume feel things.

What is striking is not just how far this goes, but the moral weight at each stage of it. The Ācārāṅga Sūtra insists even one-sensed beings feel something real: earth-beings suffer when soil is disturbed, plants suffer when cut. The text compares a branch torn from a tree to a limb torn from a human body — both decay, both lose vitality. That lands close to Paul Taylor's much later idea of living things as "teleological centres of life," each aimed at its own maturity, with harm defined as interference with that aim (Taylor, 1986). Taylor had to argue his way there against real resistance. Jain thinkers had it as a starting premise two thousand years earlier.

This is what's usually called moral inclusion — the circle of things that matter morally goes well past the human, and what earns a place in that circle isn't intelligence or a particular kind of sentience. It's just being alive. Jain philosophy doesn't ask whether a plant clears some cognitive bar. It asks only: does this thing have jīva? For the whole living world, yes.

4. Ahimsa and Eco-Philosophy

If Anekāntavāda is about how we come to know things, Ahimsā is about what we do once we think we know them. A worldview that admits it's only touched part of the elephant is naturally cautious about the rest. Jain cosmology pictures the universe as a network of jīvas with no hierarchy built in — unlike most of Western philosophy, which tends to stack humans on top.

Umāsvāmī's line from the Tattvārtha Sūtra says it directly: parasparopagraho jīvānām — souls render service to one another (5.21). The word itself carries the claim: paras, other; para, mutual; upagraha, support. Beings don't just happen to share space. They actively hold each other up. Nothing exists on its own. Modern ecology worked toward roughly the same conclusion through fieldwork — Tansley's idea of the ecosystem in the 1930s, later research on food webs and keystone species. Jain philosophy got there through reflection, and got there first, by a couple of thousand years.

There's a sharper edge to this, though. Jainism separates out three levels of involvement in violence: doing harm yourself (kṛta), telling someone else to do it (kārita), and — this is the one that stings a bit — simply going along with harm someone else causes (anumodana). Buying into a system that causes damage, or just staying indifferent to it, counts as moral involvement on this view. Clear a rainforest and it isn't an economic transaction with unfortunate side effects — it's the end of a great many lives at once.

Pollute a river and it isn't a fine waiting to be issued — it's harm done to whatever depends on that water staying clean.

Because everything's this interconnected, harm never really stays where it started. Drain a wetland and migratory birds lose a stopover, fish disappear from rivers downstream, pollinators thin out, the water table drops — undercutting the very farmland the drainage was meant to help. This is part of why Jain thought treats scattered, systemic harm — the kind no one person causes on their own — as a real moral matter, not a shrug-worthy side effect nobody's responsible for.

Ahiṃsā, as Mahāvīra taught it, isn't only about the body. Thought and speech count too, and compassion is meant to reach every living thing, not just the human ones. Taken seriously, that's close to flipping anthropocentrism on its head — toward biocentrism, where a river has standing of its own, not because it's useful to us but because it's alive in the same sense, we are.

Karma adds another layer here. It isn't just a scoreboard of good and bad acts — it's something that ties every jīva into a shared web, so every thought and action leaves a mark that binds the actor more tightly to the world. Damage to the environment, on this reading, is also an inner imbalance — greed, delusion — and it eventually comes back around. This is part of the reason that vegetarianism and careful use of resources are not treated in this tradition as lifestyle choices but as something closer to discipline (Rankin. None of this leaned on twentieth-century ecology to get there. Ahiṃsā sits close to Gandhi's own thinking, and it maps fairly well onto today's climate and biodiversity goals — which says something about how long these problems have actually been visible, waiting for someone willing to look.

5. Aparigraha and Sustainable Living

Between Anekāntavāda and Ahiṃsā, a third idea is already implied. If no view is complete, and no being outranks another, the next question is almost automatic: what does it mean to want less? That's Aparigraha, and it sits right at the centre of Jain ethics. Usually translated as non-attachment or non-possession, though neither word really covers it alone — it's both together, a refusal of the object and of the pull toward it (Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya, 113).

Umāsvāmī frames it as the direct opposite of the attachment that ties a person to things through desire (Tattvārtha Sūtra, 7.12). Amṛtacandra splits this further — internal attachment (delusion, anger, greed) and attachment to external things. Both, he says, leave the mind unsettled, because wanting and holding are disturbances regardless of what's being wanted or held.

This tracks naturally from the first two ideas. If nobody's view is complete and no being stands above another, then piling up possessions — or certainty, or status — works against the very interdependence Umāsvāmī described. Wanting less isn't a rule imposed from outside so much as where this logic ends up. And it is also in line with what sustainability really demands: own less, waste less, keep the balance (Tobias, 2012). Aparigraha becomes more like a common project when it is not understood as a private virtue but as a collective. Less hoarding means less extraction, less waste, less pollution (Chapple, 2006). Shah (2004) puts it simply — practising Aparigraha builds an awareness of one's own place in the environment. Together, the three ideas complete something like a circle: see less certainly, harm less broadly, want less altogether. That's the coherence Katarnikar had in mind calling this a Trinity.

6. From Principle to Practice: Jain Eco-Spirituality

Knowing what is right and doing it are two very different skills, and Jainism has always taken that gap very seriously. Instead of treating ethics as rules to be gritted through by willpower, the tradition folds them into daily practice — vows, rituals, small habits that quietly work on attention and desire over time. This blend is what scholars call Jain eco-spirituality, and the basic claim is that the ecological crisis and the spiritual one aren't really separate. Greed, anger, delusion — pollute the mind, and you'll eventually pollute the world.

Virginia Lincoln's framework of eco-spiritual consciousness is useful here — five qualities: tending, dwelling, reverence, connectedness, sentience. Tending is staying awake to what your own actions do, cultivated through the five anuvratas that shape a householder's life: non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, fidelity, non-possession. Monastics take it further — down to watching the ground with each step so as not to crush an insect. Dwelling is actually inhabiting the world rather than just passing through it, deepened by the belief that inner and outer pollution are the same thing wearing different faces. Reverence follows from the idea that every jīva carries infinite potential and deserves to be treated as something sacred — you see this in the twice-daily pratikramaṇa ritual, where Jains formally repent for harm done that day, and in the long tradition of jīvadayā, the animal shelters Jain communities have funded for centuries. Connectedness is the lived sense of belonging to something larger — sarvodayavāda, concern for every being's welfare, no exceptions. Sentience is Anekāntavāda showing up again from a different angle — the humility to know the human view, however careful, is just one view.

All of this counts as spiritual work as much as ethical work. Samvara — stopping new karma from accumulating — comes through discipline. Nirjara — shedding what's already there — comes through restraint and service. Looking after soil is samvara. Compassion toward a river is nirjara. Regulation and technology can restrain the worst of it, but neither makes anyone actually care. What daily practice offers instead is slower, more durable — training attention itself.

7. Taking the Objection Seriously: Mahāvratas and Anuvratas

None of this is worth much without facing the obvious pushback head-on. Push these principles to their absolute limits and things break fast. Total non-violence doesn't fit an industrial world — medicine relies on animal testing, farming kills insects as a matter of course, nations keep armies because sovereignty seems to require it. Growth, innovation, the steady use of resources — all of it runs on exactly the kind of accumulation Aparigraha, taken strictly, would forbid. Push renunciation too hard and you risk industrial collapse, and a halt to technologies — renewable energy included — that genuinely save lives. A philosophy that only works on paper hasn't actually solved anything, and that's worth admitting plainly. This is where Jainism turns out to be more workable than it first seems. Mahāvīra never expected ordinary people to live like monks. He built two tiers into the system from the start. The Mahāvratas — full Ahimsā, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya, Aparigraha — were for monks and nuns who'd stepped outside daily life entirely. For householders raising kids and running farms, there were Anuvratas — the same five vows, scaled down to fit inside an ordinary life rather than replace it. In other words, Jainism anticipated this exact objection roughly two and a half thousand years ago and built the answer in from the start.

Nobody has to give up medicine or agriculture to take something from these ideas. What's actually being asked is smaller, and more doable: a little more humility about how much of the picture any of us really sees, a little less willingness to treat harm as just the cost of doing business, a little more restraint where accumulation isn't serving any real need. None of it means abandoning modern life. It just asks modern life to move a bit more carefully.

8. Conclusion

So, what does all this actually leave us with — overconsumption, environmental damage, a widening gap between people? Not solved, certainly, not by three old ideas on their own. The crisis needs political and technological answers too. But Jain thought insists, and I think the argument here holds up, that none of those answers work without also touching the roots of the problem in the human mind — the patterns of desire and attention that decide how we treat the living world in the first place. Laws restrain behaviour. Technology softens the impact. Only an actual shift in values gets you the relationship the crisis is asking for, and that's the shift Jain practice has been rehearsing for over two thousand years.

A river doesn't need every person alive to become a monk before it gets treated with more care. A society doesn't need to give up growth to grow with more thought behind it. Read through the Anuvrata rather

than the Mahāvratā, Jainism isn't demanding perfection. It's just asking for a little less harm, a little less certainty, and a little less wanting than we're currently used to.

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