From Spiritual Vows to Global Goals: Guṇavrata and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The Jain ethical framework, particularly the Guṇavrata provide a structured approach to spiritual progress, self-discipline and moral living for a laity. These vows—Digvrata (limiting directions of movement for lifetime), Bhogopabhoga-parimāṇa-vrata (limiting use of consumable and reusable possession), and Anarthadaṇḍa-vrata (abstaining from purposeless sins)—offer significant insights into achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to some authors, Bhogopabhoga-parimāṇa-vrata is replaced by Deśavrata (Limiting area of region for certain period). This research paper shows all these vows in four ways viz. Traditional interpretation, modern interpretation and application of vows for attaining sustainable development goals, transgressions of the vows and psychological aspect of the vows. By reinterpreting Jain Guṇavrata in light of modern dilemmas, this study bridges ancient wisdom with contemporary challenges like climate change limited resource consumption, social well being, demonstrating how Jain laity can integrate these principles into daily life for both personal spiritual progress and global sustainability. Through textual analysis and comparative studies, this research highlights the unexplored dimensions of Guṇavrata in shaping a responsible and sustainable future.

Keywords :Laity, Vows, ethics, Guṇavrata

Introduction

According to Jainism, the ultimate bliss is achieved through liberation which is the highest goal of a being. The journey to liberation begins with Laity-hood and moves via Monk-hood towards the end destination of salvation. Those who practice the path of partial abstinence are called laity or householders.

The highest ideal is to embrace the vows of monkhood; however, if one is unable to undertake the major vows of a monk, one may still be regarded as a lay follower by adopting the minor vows. These minor vows are twelve in both the traditions of Jainism viz. Śvetāmbara and Digambara. As said by ĀcāryaSamantabhadra in Ratnakarandaśrāvakācāra -

गृहिणांत्रेधातिष्ठत्यणुगुणशिक्षाव्रतात्मकंचरणम्।पञ्चत्रिचतुर्भेदंत्रयंयथासङ्ख्यमाख्यातम्॥५१॥

Conduct (cāritra) for the householders is of three kinds - small vows-Aṇuvrata, subsidiary vows-Guṇavrata, and instructional vows-Śikṣāvrata. These have been further subdivided into five, three and four categories, respectively. As said in Śrāvakadharmavidhi by ĀcāryaHaribhadrasūri -

सम्मत्तमूलियाऊ, पंचाणुव्वयगुणव्वयातिण्णिचउसिक्खावयसहिओ, सावगधम्मोदुवालसहा॥१३॥

The shravakdharm based on samyaktva (righteousness, i.e. a specific state of righteousness where right perception and right knowledge start translating into right conduct) has twelve types (limbs) including five Aṇuvrata (minor-vows), three Guṇavrata (restraints that reinforce the practice of five Aṇuvrata), and four Śikṣāvrata (vows of spiritual discipline).

Fig 1 depicting 12 vratas of a laity.

1. What are Guṇavrata?

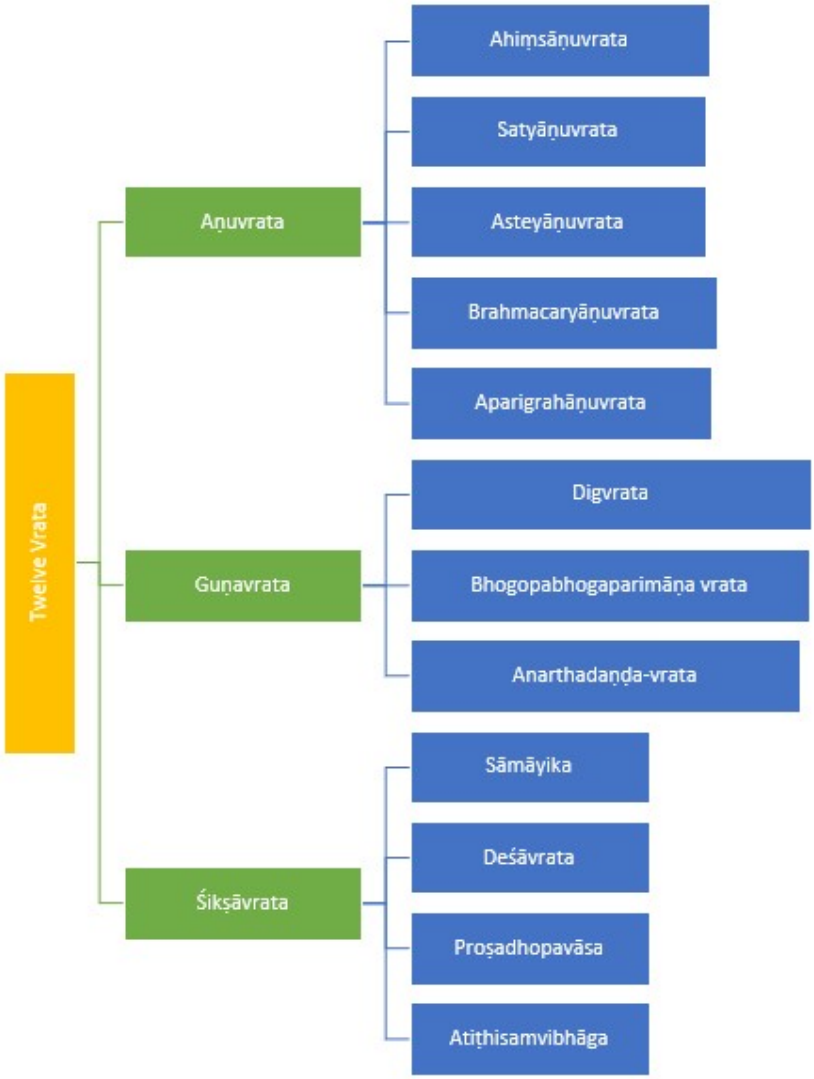
The three vows are known as merit vows (Guṇavrata), so called because they enhance, strengthen and multiply the values of five basic minor vows.

As said in Dharmasaṅgrahaśrāvakācāra by PaṇḍitaUdayalālaKāślīvāla in chapter 4, verse 1

पञ्चाणुव्रतरक्षार्थंपाल्यतेशीलसप्तकम्।शस्यवत्क्षेत्रवृद्धयर्थंक्रियतेमहतीवृतिः॥१॥

Meaning – The Guṇavrata and Śikṣāvrata are supplementary vows those govern the external conduct of an individual by protecting minor vows just like a farm is protected by a proper fencing.

According to the 2nd-century writer ĀcāryaUmāsvāmi, as given in Tattvārthasūtra 7.21



दिग्देशानर्थदण्डविरतिसामयिकप्रोषधोपवासोपभोगपरिभोगपरिमाणातिथिसंविभागव्रतसम्पन्नश्च॥२१॥

Figure 1 : 12 Vratas chart

Abstaining from activity with regard to direction, country and purposeless sin, periodical concentration, fasting at regular intervals, limiting consumable and non-consumable things, and partaking of one's food after feeding an ascetic, are the minor or supplementary vows. And in SāgāraDharmāmṛta 5.1 -

यद्गुणायोपकारायाणुव्रतानांव्रतानितत्।गुणव्रतानि।

These three vows enhance the value of minor vows, thus are called Guṇavrata.Thus, these three vows regulate and elevate the practice of basic vows by limiting one's movement, possessions, and activities in more refined ways.

2. What is Sustainable development?

Sustainable development is how we must live today if we want a better tomorrow, by meeting present needs without compromising the chances of future generations to meet their needs. The survival of our societies and our shared planet depends on a more sustainable world.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations (UN) members in 2015, created 17 world Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The aim of these global goals is peace and prosperity for people and the planet.

The 17 SDGs are:

SDG 1. No poverty

SDG 2. Zero hunger

SDG 3. Good health and well-being

SDG 4. Quality education

SDG 5. Gender equality

SDG 6. Clean water and sanitation

SDG 7. Affordable and clean energy

SDG 8. Decent work and economic growth

SDG 9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure

SDG 10. Reduced inequalities

SDG 11. Sustainable cities and communities

SDG 12. Responsible consumption and production

SDG 13. Climate action

SDG 14. Life below water

SDG 15. Life on land

SDG 16. Peace, justice, and strong institutions

SDG 17. Partnerships for the goals

While Guṇavratas—ethical vows from ancient Jain philosophy—and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) may initially appear to belong to entirely different contexts, this paper endeavors to bridge the perceived distance between the two. By examining their core values, this study reveals how the timeless moral principles embedded in Guṇavratas align with and can meaningfully contribute to the global vision of sustainable development. Through this interdisciplinary exploration, we aim to demonstrate that ancient spiritual frameworks hold relevant and practical insights for addressing contemporary global challenges.

3. Detailed study of Guṇavrata

Let us now have a look at the Guṇavrata as described in the Jain scriptures. When we examine the scriptures, we find that the Guṇavrata are described differently across various texts. In Mahāpurāṇa /10/165

*दिग्देशानर्थदंडेभ्योविरतिः स्यादणुव्रतम्।भोगोपभोगसंख्यानमप्याहुस्तद्गुणव्रतम्।।*165 //

Digvrata, Deśāvrata, and Anarthadaṇḍa-vrata are considered the three principalGuṇavratas. Some Ācāryas also classify the BhogopabhogaParimāṇa-vrata as a Guṇavrata, while others include Deśavṛta under the category of Śikṣāvratas (disciplinary vows).

Name of all these Vratas.

i. Digvrata (Vow of Limiting Directions of Movement)
ii. A. Bhogopabhogaparimāṇavrata (Vow of Limiting Consumable and Reusable Items)
    B. Deśāvrata (Vow of Limiting area of region for a certain period)
iii. Anarthadaṇḍa-vrata (Vow of Abstaining from purposeless sin)

Scriptures namely RatnakaraṇḍaŚrāvakācāra, SāgaraDharmāmṛta, DharmasaṅgrahaŚrāvakācāra, Yogaśāstra, AvaśyakaSūtra, Śrāvakadharma Vidhi, etc. include BhogopabhogaParimāṇa-vrata in the list along with Digvrata and Anarthadaṇḍa-vrata, whereas scriptures namely PuruṣārthaSiddhyupāya, Yaśastilakacampu,

AmitagatiŚrāvakācāra, LāṭīSaṁhitā, Tattvārthasūtra, etc. include Deśavṛta instead of BhogopabhogaParimāṇa-vrata from the above list.

In this paper, these vows are studied from four perspectives as given below -

i. Traditional interpretations :Traditional interpretations shall include the description of each vow as given in various Jain scriptures looking into both the traditions of Śvetāmbara and Digambara.
ii. Modern reinterpretations of the vows :Modern Interpretations shall include the study of these vows as per the contemporary period with reference to achieving sustainable development goals by application of these vows.
iii. Transgressions (Aticāra) :Transgressions refer to the violation of vows which should be avoided by the Laity while following them. We find five transgressions of each vow which will be mentioned in this study
iv. Psychological aspect of the vows :Vows are not limited to physical actions alone; they also encompass mental and psychological dimensions, including the intentions behind them. A vow cannot truly be considered a vow if it is not rooted in the mind and intention.

A. Digvrata (Vow of Limiting Directions of Movement)

Traditional Interpretation:As given in RatnakaraṇḍaŚrāvakācāra by ĀcāryaSamantabhadra in verse 68

दिग्वलयंपरिगणितंकृत्वातोऽहंबहिर्नयास्यामि।
इतिसङ्कल्पोदिग्व्रतमामृत्यणुपापविनिवृत्त्यै।।६८।।

Meaning - “I shall not participate in activities beyond set limits in different directions,” to make such a resolve, for the rest of one’s life, with a view to curb even subtle sins (beyond the set limits), is known as the vow of abstaining from activity with regard to direction (digvrata).

A layperson limits their movement to a defined geographical area with regards to oceans, mountains, forests, rivers or any area with well known reference objects by deciding the limits of all ten directions viz. east, west, north, south, Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, Northwest, upwards and downwards to avoid unnecessary travel and harm to living beings. This vow is taken for lifetime.

The person takes an oath to not go out of these limits no matter what the reason may be. Neither he/she will send letters nor keep any relation in the activities out of limited areas.As said by ĀcāryaAmṛtacandra in PuruṣārthaSiddhyupāya

इतिनियमितदिग्भागेप्रवर्ततेयस्ततोबहिस्तस्य।

सकलासंयमविरहाद्भवत्यहिंसाव्रतंपूर्णम्।।१३८।।

This vow reinforces the principle of Ahimsa (non-violence) by preventing harm to microorganisms and animals in territories beyond the limitations decided.

An intriguing insight related to this vow with relation to the above verse of PuruṣārthaSiddhyupāya is presented in verse 70 of RatnakaraṇḍaŚrāvakācāra by ĀcāryaSamantabhadra

अवधेर्बहिरणुपापंप्रतिविरतेर्दिग्व्रतानिधारयताम्।

पञ्चमहाव्रतपरिणतिमणुव्रतानिप्रपद्यन्ते।।७०।।

Because of abstinence of even subtle sins in the regions beyond the limits set in the Vow of Limiting Directions of Movement (digvrata), the minor vows of householder are able to rank as the great vows of ascetic (Mahāvrata) outside their set limits.

Modern Reinterpretation:In today's world, this vow can be seen as promoting environmental sustainability by reducing unnecessary travel, cutting carbon emissions, and adopting eco-friendly transportation. This further helps in reducing pollution, resource conservation and lowering environmental degradation.This can be achieved by choosing local products over global products, supporting walkable cities, using public transport etc.

Transgressions (Aticāra):Violating limits set for movement in upward direction, Violating limits set for movement in downward direction, Violating limits set for other eight directions, enlarging the set limits, and forgetting the boundaries set, are the five transgressions of the Vow of Limiting Directions of Movement (digvrata) as said in the following verse of RatnakaraṇḍaŚrāvakācāra.

ऊर्ध्वाधस्तात्तिर्यग्व्यतिपाताःक्षेत्रवृद्धिरवधीनाम्।

विस्मरणंदिग्विरतेत्याशाःपञ्चमन्यन्ते।।७३।।

Psychological aspect :Beyond physical movement, Digvrata can be a commitment to emotional and psychological discipline, reducing unnecessary attachments and distractions.

This aligns with mindfulness practices, where individuals vow to stay mentally present and avoid constant craving for external validation. This also includes control of thoughts and not just the physical deeds of travelling to a particular place.

B. i. BhogopabhogaParimāṇa-vrata (Vow of Limiting Consumable and Reusable Items)

Traditional Interpretation :As given in RatnakaraṇḍaŚrāvakācāra by ĀcāryaSamantabhadra in verse 82

अक्षार्थनांपरिसंख्यानंभोगोपभोगपरिमाणम्।
अर्थवतामप्यवधौरागरतीनांतनूकृतये।।८२।।

Within the limits set for possessions under the possession-limiting vow, to further set, with a view to limiting craving for the objects of sense-pleasures, limits on the possession of consumable and non-consumable sense-objects is called the Vow of limiting consumable and reusable possessions.

Here, bhoga includes consumables like food, flower garlands etc. which are used once and upabhoga includes reusables like clothing, furniture etc. Clearly, a laity renounces himself from all the inconsumable objects like root vegetables, honey, meat or anything that directly injures the mobile beings.

This vow aims to cultivate Aparigraha (non-possessiveness) and reduce attachment to material pleasures by limiting their collection, usage and preservation. By setting clear boundaries on acquisition and usage of the consumables and reusables, individuals not only curb their desires but also prevent the accumulation of excess. This restraint naturally leads to a reduction in harmful activities often driven by greed and indulgence, thereby aiding in the renunciation of hiṃsā (violence).

Modern Reinterpretation :Promotes sustainable living by encouraging conscious consumption, reducing waste, and embracing the concept of Aparigraha. Here, the concept of minimalism can also be acknowledged which can have some similaritiy with the concept of Aparigraha and this vow of BhogopabhogaParimāṇa-vrata.

Encourages ethical consumerism, such as supporting fair-trade, eco-friendly, and cruelty-free products and this helping in environmental conservation.

In a digital age, this could also mean data and information consumption control, avoiding excess social media, news, and entertainment that leads to mental clutter.This vow can be achieved by using reusable products/bags, practicing zero waste lifestyle, using sustainable products etc.

Transgressions (Aticāra):Not having a sense of withdrawal from the sensual enjoyment, thinking over and over again of the sensual pleasures experienced in the past, excessive indulgence in the sensual pleasures in present, intense craving for sensual pleasure, going through sensous experiences in imagination these are called the five transgressions of the BhogopabhogaParimāṇa-vrata as said in the verse 90 of RatnakaraṇḍaŚrāvakācāra

विषयविषतोऽनुपेक्षानुस्मृतिरतिलौल्यमतितृषाऽनुभवौ।

भोगोपभोगपरिमाव्यतिक्रमाःपञ्चकथ्यन्ते।।९०।।

Psychological aspect :This vow is not limited to the deeds or activities as stated above, but the vow leads to the lesser attachment towards the objects, thus having self discipline. This can also include limiting the inner possessions like anger, pride, greed etc.to the extent one can follow.

Materialism is a cause of anxiety, stress and this vow helps in overcoming or not at all producing these mental uneasiness. Controlling desires undoubtedly lead to better decision making.

ii. Deśavrata (Vow of Limiting area of region for a certain period)

Traditional interpretation :As given in RatnakaraṇḍaŚrāvakācāra by ĀcāryaSamantabhadra in verse 92

देशावकाशिकंस्यात्कालपरिच्छेदनेनदेशस्य।

प्रत्यहमणुव्रतानांप्रतिसंहारोविशालस्य।।९२।।

Restricting further, on a day-to-day basis or for a limited period, the field of activity only to certain regions out of the earlier fixed directions (under the vow of abstaining from activity with regard to direction - digvrata), is called the Vow of Limiting area of region for a certain period (deśavrata).As said by ĀcāryaAmṛtacandra in PuruṣārthaSiddhyupāya verse 139 and 140

तत्रापिचपरिमाणंग्रामापणभवनपाटकादीनाम्।

प्रविधायनियतकालंकरणीयंविरमणंदेशात्।।१३९।।

Within the limits (set in digvrata), one should again fix limits specifying a village, market, house, street etc., for a fixed period of time, and abstain from activities outside the new limit (Deśavrata).

इतिविरतोबहुदेशात्तदुत्थहिंसाविशेषपरिहारात्।
तत्कालंविमलमतिःश्रयत्यहिंसांविशेषेण।।१४०।।

This way, desisting from activity in a vast region for a fixed time period, the pure-minded effectively renounces, for that time and space, all hiṁsā, and, therefore, must be deemed to observe the vow of complete ahiṁsā.The vow of Deśavrata involves temporarily limiting movement, consumption, or interaction within a specific boundary for a fixed time.

Modern interpretation :Today's world, Deśavrata can be reinterpreted as a tool for mindfulness, sustainability, and ethical self-discipline.One limits the movement thus limiting the use of natural resources, atleast for a certain period.This vow can also lead to limiting shopping online if the buyer is out of the limit that one has decided.Observing verbal restraint by person outside the set limit on calls, chats for certain days like fasting days, auspicious days or spiritual festivals.

Transgressions (Aticāra): The five transgressions of the Vow of Limiting area of region for a certain period are sending someone outside the set limit for bringing something, making sound so as to attract attention of people outside the limit, asking someone to bring something from the region outside set boundaries, showing gestures to people outside the limit, and throwing pebbles etc. outside the region of one's resolve as said in RatnakaraṇḍaŚrāvakācāra -

प्रेषणशब्दानयनंरूपाभिव्यक्तिपुद्गलक्षेपौ।
देशावकाशिकस्यव्यपदिश्यन्तेऽत्ययाःपञ्च।।९६।।

Psychological aspect :This vow can easily be understood from the point of psychology. Leave behind travelling beyond the limits, even thinking about going to a certain place that is beyond the limit is abstained in this vow. This can lead to self mind control which can lead to inner peace and thus strengthening the path to liberation.

C. Anarthadaṇḍa-vrata (Vow of Abstaining from Purposeless Sin)

Traditional Interpretation :As given in RatnakaraṇḍaŚrāvakācāra by ĀcāryaSamantabhadra in verse 74

अभ्यन्तरंदिगवधेरपार्थकेभ्यःसपापयोगेभ्यः।

विरमणमनर्थदण्डव्रतंविदुर्व्रतधराग्रण्यः।।७४।।

To abstain from purposeless sinful activity (of the mind, the speech, and the body), even within the limits set under digvrata, is known by the best of ascetics as Vow of Abstaining from purposeless sin.

This vow, thus avoids engaging in unnecessary sinful acts such as gossiping, harmful speech, excessive entertainment, and supporting violence indirectly. These activities are sinful activities having no advantage at all.This, the vow encourages meaningful speech, ethical thinking, and avoiding anartha (purposeless actions leading to harm).

Five types of Anarthadaṇḍa :According to ĀcāryaSamantabhadra, five types of Anarthadaṇḍa are explained in RatnakaraṇḍaŚrāvakācāra in verse 74 as below

पापोपदेशहिंसादानापध्यानदुःश्रुतीःपञ्च।

प्राहुःप्रमादचर्य्यामनर्थदण्डानदण्डधराः।।७५।।

The best of ascetics call preaching of sin (Pāpopadeśa), giving of things that cause injury (Hiṁsādāna), evil thoughts (Apadhyāna), listening to undesirable stories (Duḥśruti), and negligent activity (Pramādacaryā), as purposeless sinful activity -Anarthadaṇḍa.Preaching of sin is giving sinful advice that cause cruelty to animals or any living being like preaching the methods of opening slaughter house or trading in leather goods etc.To pass on instruments those can cause injury like sword, axe, knife etc. is the second type of Anarthadaṇḍa.To entertain thoughts like killing someone due to aversion or causing harm to someone are the evil thoughts.Listening to stories of sins, hatred, attachment or any evil stories those arouse passions are all undesirable stories.Purposelessly digging earth, sprinkling water, lighting fire, cutting grass or plants, plucking flowers or leaves comes under the category of negligent activities.

Modern Reinterpretation :This vow in contemporary period can be extended to ethical communication, avoiding misinformation, fake news, unnecessary gossip and online hate speech.

This can also include refraining from watching reels, watching series or movies that arouse passions or obsessive excitement. Along with this, to turn off the electricity when not in use, avoiding long time scrolling of phones, avoiding window shopping can be counted in this vow.The vow encourages mindful media consumption, refraining from violent entertainment and harmful digital distractions.

This vow aligns with corporate ethics, where businesses should avoid unnecessary harm through misleading advertisements, exploitative practices, or unethical investments.This can be achieved by supporting ethical business practices, avoiding fake news and information and verifying it before forwarding, limiting the on-screen time etc.

Transgressions (Aticāra): As given in RatnakaraṇḍaŚrāvakācāra

कन्दर्पकौत्कुच्यंमौखर्यमतिप्रसाधनंपञ्च।

असमीक्ष्यचाधिकरणंव्यतीतयोऽनर्थदण्डकृद्विरतेः।।८१।।

Uttering obscene or words, making inappropriate gestures, talking rubbish or nonsense, keeping surplus stock of consumables and reusables, indulging unthinkingly in activities are the five transgressions of the vow of abstaining from purposeless sin (Anarthadaṇḍa-vrata).
Psychological aspect :The vow can include not only to preclude from unnecessary sinful activities but also to refrain from thoughts of such activities which can control negative thoughts and thus increasing productivity and inner peace.

Practicing this vow in the digital age can reduce social anxiety, comparison stress and negative emotional triggers.This vow can be maintained by detaching or decluttering oneself from unnecessary emotional triggers.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Guṇavrata—three supplementary vows undertaken by Jain householders—offer profound ethical guidance that aligns remarkably well with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These vows promote non-violence, non-possession, and responsible behavior within the limits of lay life. By following Digvrata (Vow of Limiting Directions of Movement), Bhogopabhogaparimāṇavrata (Vow of Limiting Consumable and Reusable Items), Deśāvrata (Vow of Limiting area of region for a certain period) and Anarthadaṇḍa-vrata (Vow of Abstaining from purposeless sin), Guṇavratanurture

environmental consciousness, ethical consumption, and peaceful coexistence. These principles directly support SDGs related to climate action, responsible consumption, peace, and justice. Unlike modern policies that often address sustainability externally, Guṇavrata initiate change from within by fostering individual responsibility. Thus, Jain ethics—when interpreted through a contemporary lens—can enrich the global discourse on sustainability. Embracing these ancient vows can inspire a lifestyle rooted in self-regulation and ecological balance, bridging spiritual practice with global sustainable action. The synergy between Guṇavrata and SDGs reaffirms that timeless values can meaningfully address modern challenges.

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