Ancient Vows, Modern Goals: A Jain Perspective on Sustainability through ŚrāvakaVratas

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Abstract

This paper explores the connection between Jain ethical life and modern sustainability goals. The ŚrāvakaVratas, as propagated by the Tīrthaṅkaras and undertaken by the Jain householder (śrāvaka), are rooted in the principles of non-violence (ahiṁsā), non-attachment (aparigraha), and high moral standards. These vows serve as a guiding light for a disciplined, minimalistic, ecological, and conscious life. Understanding the practical application of these vows in contemporary living reveals a cohesiveness with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (especially those related to climate change, peace, justice, and equality, among others). From an ancient textual perspective, the study aims to highlight not only a religious or moral code but also a time-tested model of sustainability, taking the human race back to its roots. In doing so, it emphasizes the relevance of ancient spiritual discipline as a tool to address the ecological challenges of the modern world.

Objectives

1. To bring out the relevance of the vows of a Jain householder as established by the fordmakers (Tīrthaṅkaras) towards a more sustainable world.
2. To highlight, the Jain vows are not merely religious practices but a way of living that provides a better ecosystem and quality of life through conscious living.
3. Sustainability, although an extremely relevant concept in recent times, has been revered in ancient times by the omniscient.

Introduction

The Jain philosophy is one of the oldest philosophies in the world. The Tīrthaṅkarasestablished a four-fold congregation of ascetics (sādhu)and householders (śrāvaka): those who could not fully renounce the world were encouraged to adopt the twelvevratas for spiritual upliftment while participating in society.These vrataspromote spiritual growth and encourage a conscious lifestyle towards the environment and the beings around us. The vratas are scientific in nature and are followed based on one's mental capacity. Since they are a scaled-down version of the vows taken by monks and nuns, they are called aṇuvratas.Ancient texts discuss the twelvevratas and the intricacies and transgressions involved in each one.[1]Like many other philosophies, Jainism has evolved into a religion focused on religious practices and rituals. However, the core principles of non-violence (ahiṁsā) and non-attachment (aparigraha) advocate a way of life that harmonizes with nature and serves as a practical guide to a sustainable and responsible lifestyle. It supports a lifestyle aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Goals, established in 2015, as an urgent call to action for all countries.[2]

Jainism promotes peaceful coexistence, self-discipline, and social responsibility. These values enhance community well-being (SDG 16), gender equality (SDG 5), and education (SDG 4). On a deeper level, the Jain worldview perceives all life as interconnected. This spiritual ecology emphasizes the significance of partnerships for the goals (SDG 17)as a reminder that sustainable development is a collective moral obligationgrounded in compassion and respect.

The twelve vratas are divided into five aṇuvratas,which areascaled-down version of those taken by ascetics, three gunavratas that safeguard the intrinsic nature of the self and checkagainst externalindulgence, and four śikṣāvratas that nurture teaching and education towards the right path.

Five Aṇuvratas

1. Ahiṃsā Aṇuvrata -

[1]Yuvacharya Shri Mishrimalji Maharaj 'Madhukar', *Upāsakadāśa Sūtra*, Shri Agam Prakashan Samiti, Beawar, Rajasthan, 4th Ed, 2006, pg 29 - 41
[2] https://sdgs.un.org/goals

Non-violence is the essence of Jain philosophy. It extends to every living organism, including immobile beings of air, water, fire, plants, and earth and mobile beings like insects, animals and humans. In light of this, it encourages a lifestyle that harmsno animal or being. Therefore, vegetarianism is a fundamentalprinciple of Jain life. It reduces animal suffering while lowering carbon emissions and resource consumption.Research shows that a big meat-eater's diet produces an average of 10.24 kg of planet-warming greenhouse gasses each day, a low meat-eater produces almost half that at 5.37 kg per day, while a vegan diet comes down to 2.47 kg a day.[3]Along withvegetarianism,mitigating the negative effects of animal fat on cancer and cardiovascular diseases.[4]The Jain philosophyadvocatesagainstmethodsthat harm insects, such as chemicals and pesticides, thereby encouraging biodiversity, coexistence, and the protectionand preservation ofthe ecosystem.Thus, it supports zero hunger (SDG2), directly impacting on the health and well-being (SDG 3), clean water and sanitation through the use of filtered water (SDG 6),responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), and life on land (SDG 15). Non violence is the foundation for peaceful societies bringing about justice (SDG 16).

2. Satya Aṇuvrata

Truthful communication regarding personal and external affairs is the second vow of the śrāvaka. It establishes refrain from any gross untruth that would adversely affect another; refrain fron drawing allegation on an indicudual without knowing all facts, refrain from preaching false doctrines and refrain from forgery.[5]It encourages a strong foundation for peaceful and inclusive societies. It eliminates conflict and discourages toxicity in thought, speech, and action, thus bringing harmony to daily life. Truth (satya)helps reduce social, economic, and political inequalities by advocating for peaceful conflict resolution and equitable treatment. Truth is an important moral lesson for conscious living and consideration of other beings. It reinstates good health and well-being (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4), peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16).

[3]Pallab Ghosh, Eating less meat 'like taking 8m cars off road', BBC news, 2023 https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-66238584#
[4] Gidon Eshel &Pamela Martin,*Diet, Energy, And Global Warming,* 2006
[5]Shri Amar Muni, *Upāsak-Dashā & Anuttaraupapātik-Dashā Sūtra*, Padma Prakashan, Delhi, 1st Ed. 2003, pg. 35

3. Asteya Or Achaurya Aṇuvrata

   Theft is considered an immoral activity. It is often drivenby financial gain, desperation, or addiction to support a desired lifestyle.[6] It fosters an anxious way of living and disrupts the harmonious existence of society. It leads to comparisons and dissatisfaction.Abstaining from receiving stolen property, abetting theft, purchasing goods from thieves or smugglers, and falsely using weights and measures, aswellas adulteration, apart from robbing travellers and breaking into others' properties,isemphasized in ancient vows.[7] Restraint on theft encourages hard work, harmony, and the realization that nothing truly belongs to us. It promotes gratitude and prosperity.[8]It supports good health and well-being (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4), peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16), and global partnerships (SDG 17).

4. Brahmacarya Aṇuvrata

   Any action that distances one from the true self deservestobe limited. While brahmacarya predominantly pertains to celibacy or restraint from sexual desires and actions, italsoencompassesany form ofsensualindulgenceinabroader sense. The relevance of monogamy is highlighted in this vrata. It nurtures healthy relationships and encourages loyalty. Additionally, this vrata safeguards against underage sexual indulgences and the exploitation of vulnerable individuals (such as widows and sex workers). This practice enhances focus without distractions and fosters respect for all genders within society. Overindulgence in sex can lead tonumerousnegativeeffects. Controlled restraint on sensual and sexual pleasures promotesgood health and well-being (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), andpeace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16).

5. Aparigraha Aṇuvrata

   One of the essential tenets of Jain philosophy, aparigraha, promotes a simple, minimalist lifestylethat limits material possessions and attachments. It encourages avoiding overconsumption and taking only what is necessary. It supports reducing waste, making mindful purchases, and prioritizing needs over wants. It sets limits on possessing wealth,

[6] https://fastercapital.com/topics/common-causes-of-theft.html
[7] Shri Amar Muni, *Upāsak-Dashā & Anuttaraupapātik-Dashā Sūtra*, Padma Prakashan, Delhi, 1st Ed. 2003, pg. 37
[8] https://yongtiencin.medium.com/the-importance-of-asteya-nonstealing-3e6f4fe3594a

land, transportation, animals, and people.[9] In abroadercontext, it mitigates the harmful effects of consumerism that have overtakenthe minds and lives of humans. This leads to a decrease in waste and landfills that adversely affect the environment as a whole. It fosters equitableresourcedistribution, diminishing disparities within society. This aligns with theobjectives of no poverty (SDG 1), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and responsible consumption and production (SDG 12). The Jain approach, thus, supports a circular economy and low-impact living.

Three Gunavratas

6. Digvrata

   Restraint on movement in all directions is the sixth vow for a householder. It limits unnecessary movement in every direction: by road, water, or air. With globalization, extensive communication and curiosity about expanding horizons have made road and air transport necessary.This transport accounts for around one-quarter of global carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions from energy.[10]This vow checks the unnecessary air travel that has become an inherent part of life today. Atitscore, this relates to thenon-violence of organisms in air, water, and land. From an environmental perspective, it helps controlcarbon emissions and thus mitigates the impact on the ozone layer. It promotes good health and well-being (SDG 3) by reducing traffic and pollution, climate change (SDG 11) by directly decreasing carbon emissions, and sustainable cities and communities (SDG 13) through more eco-friendly urbanization.

7. Bhogopabhoga-Parimāṇa-Vrata

   Vanity, hygiene, and personal necessitieshave been inherent aspects of life since ancient times. With extensive marketing and social media, their prevalence has increased. While some items are used once, others are reused multiple times. This vow emphasizes control

[9]Shri Amar Muni, *Upāsak-Dashā & Anuttaraupapātik-Dashā Sūtra*, Padma Prakashan, Delhi, 1st Ed. 2003, pg. 39
[10]Hannah Ritchie (2023), *Which form of transport has the smallest carbon footprint?*, Published online at OurWorldinData.org. Retrieved from: https://ourworldindata.org/travel-carbon-footprint [Online Resource]

overthe usage of all daily products (like soap, toothpaste, perfumed oil, flowers, clothes, shoes, food, drinks, jewelry etc.), whether used once or multiple times.[11]

Furthermore, this vrata also emphasizesavoiding fifteen forbidden trades: coal, clearing forests, modes of transport, animals, opening the earth, ivory, shellac, intoxicants, inflammables, poisons, piercing animals, oil milling, drying out water bodies, rearing animals, etc.[12] Not only are these harmfulto the targetedorganisms but also detrimental to the environment and the ecosystem as it exists.

Reducing the excessive use of harmful products promotes a cleaner lifestyle (SDG 3). Thisdecreased consumption fosters sustainable communities (SDG 11), encourages responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), reduces carbon footprints associated with production, packaging, and waste (SDG 13), and minimizes strain on ecosystems, enhancing biodiversity through the use of natural resources (SDG 15)while strengthening global partnerships (SDG 17).

8. Anarthadaṇḍa-Vrata

Considering the perspective of living in a society, Jain philosophy distinguishes between necessary evils (arthadaṇḍa) and unnecessary evils (anarthadaṇḍa) that harm other organisms and the environment,which in turn are detrimental to the self,pulling it away from bliss and peace. Any actions of the mind, speech, or body related to day-to-day living (such as cooking, cleaning, or working for a livelihood) are necessary and do not involve a high level of self-damage; however, actions that are not essential for livelihood and are aimless for an individual[13] (such asboasting, gossip, entertainment, indulgence in sensual pleasures, restaurant visits, and holidays) are unnecessary. Commentator Ācārya Abhaydevsuri has categorized any activity that does not belong to the category of duty (dharma), livelihood(artha),orpleasure (kāma)as anarthadaṇḍa[14] and should thusbe avoided. Encouraging or advising any individual toward any actions of violence (whether subtle or

[11]Shri Amar Muni, *Upāsak-Dashā & Anuttaraupapātik-Dashā Sūtra*, Padma Prakashan, Delhi, 1st Ed. 2003, pg 21-33
[12]Ibid; Ch 1, Sutra 51, pg 43 - 44
[13]Yuvacharya Shri Mishrimalji Maharaj 'Madhukar', *Upāsakadāśa Sūtra*, Shri Agam Prakashan Samiti, Beawar, Rajasthan, 4th Ed, 2006, pg 40
[14] Ibid;

gross) falls under this category. It lowers morality and ethical conduct in society. Thus, this vrata supports mental well-being (SDG 3), creating a peaceful, conscious society (SDG 16) and partnership goals (SDG 17).

Four Śikṣāvratas

9. Sāmāyika-Vrata

   Sāmāyika cuts off from the world to dive deep within the self. It is a meditative state that protects all beings through non-violence in thought, speech, or action. It encourages mindfulness, peace, and emotional regulation free of attachments, dislike, hatred, anger, and ego. It serves as a disconnect from consumption and fosters decision-making; it brings out the realization of the impermanence of things and enhances the belief in the permanence of consciousness. The main aim of this vow is to instill the feeling of equanimity in an individual. It is not momentary but should be embraced as a way of life. It supports a healthy, regulated lifestyle (SDG 3). It fosters good education (SDG 4) and establishes peace and justice in society with a cultivated change in mindset (SDG 16).

10. Deśāvakāśika-Vrata

    Similar to the sixthvrata,whichlimits distances for a lifetime, this vow serves as a daily restraint. It provides a regular check on all the vratas that have been undertaken, encouraging conscious decision-making indaily life. It establishes control over indulgences,thereby supporting both the self and the environment in the same manneras the sixth vow does.

11. Pauṣadhopavāsa-Vrata

    Pauṣadhis an activity that strengthens the practice of dharma, and upavāsasignifiesmoving closer to one'sinnervirtues.[15] The vow of engaging inpauṣadhopavāsaentails living the life of a monk for a specified period,duringwhich one severs ties to the external world, limits food intake, avoids vanity and violence toward the six types of beings, and observes strict celibacy from sensual and sexual indulgences. Observing this practice a few times a month is profoundly reflective and fosters peace and well-being (SDG 3, SDG 16). It encourages a

[15]Yuvacharya Shri Mishrimalji Maharaj 'Madhukar', *Upāsakadāśa Sūtra*, Shri Agam Prakashan Samiti, Beawar, Rajasthan, 4th Ed, 2006, pg 57

healthy lifestyle that enhances conscious decision-making regarding what is right versus wrong.

12. Atiṭhī-Samvibhāga-Vrata

The last of the twelve vratas of a householder is a directive to divide and sharefood, beverages, clothes, and other resourceswith a guest.[16]Although it primarily focuses on sharing with ascetics, it holds significant value for society as a whole. It should not be misunderstood ascharity. Instead, it represents a mindful understanding ofsharing resources to address theinequality of lifestyle. In a world of selfish and miserly people, it nurtures generosity and selflessness. Though as a vow, it fights poverty (SDG 1), fostering zero hunger (SDG 2), and bringing out good health and wellbeing (SDG 3). It attempts to reduce inequalities (SDG 10). Lastly, it aids in overindulgence by way of responsible consumption (SDG 12) and partnership goals (SDG 17).

Conclusion

The world is engulfed inissues of consumerism, cybercrimes, violence, and conflicts (internal and external). External conflicts emerge from internal ones, or internal conflicts emerge from external ones: this is a constant question facing the world today. The lives of individuals are driven by social media, external validation, and desires. The portrayal of life as shownbypeoplepromotes a competitive lifestyle that lacks satisfaction and peace. The relentlesspursuitofacquiring more leads to problems that are difficult to address. Psychological issues transform into physical ones. From an early age, luxuries are becoming necessities. It is becoming a vicious circle that is hard to break. Throughoutthis process, nature, the environment, and the ecosystem have become topics of conversation for onlya few. The detrimental effects are overlooked due to a careless attitude towards the future of the planet and the human race.

The Jain way of life offers timeless wisdom and a proven path of sustainable, conscious, ecological, and harmonious living. It enhances individual well-being and significantly contributes to global conservation, safeguarding the ecosystem and reducing the carbon

[16]Shri Amar Muni, *Upāsak-Dashā & Anuttaraupapātik-Dashā Sūtra*, Padma Prakashan, Delhi, 1st Ed. 2003, pg. 38-39

footprint. By embracing these principles, the world can progress towards a more compassionate, just, peaceful, and balanced experience. The values emphasized by living with the twelve vratas not only align with the UN's SDGs but also requirea deeper moral and ethical commitment to the planet, earth, water, and all organisms. Long before the formal articulation of the Sustainable Development Goals, Jain philosophy integrated principles that are now deemedessential for global survival and harmony.By adopting and internalizing these vows in daily life, individuals can contribute meaningfully to the sustainability movement—living with less, consuming mindfully, caring deeply for all life, and promoting peace in both thought and action.Though it comes from ancient times, it aligns with the more recent goals of the world as a whole. All in all, the twelve vratas can be viewed as a way of life that is in sync with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

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