

## **A Jain Approach to Sustainable Development Goals**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the alignment between Jain philosophy and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting how ancient Jain principles offer a profound ethical and ecological framework for achieving global sustainability. Rooted in the doctrines of Ahimsa (non-violence), Aparigraha (non-possessiveness), and Syadvada (multiplicity of perspectives), Jainism promotes a lifestyle of minimalism, compassion, and environmental stewardship. The study analyzes how these core values can contribute to various SDGs such as responsible consumption (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16). Through textual analysis, case studies, and contemporary examples, this paper argues that integrating Jain ethical practices into personal, institutional, and policy frameworks can offer sustainable pathways for inclusive development. The findings underscore the relevance of indigenous religious wisdom in modern sustainability discourses and call for deeper intercultural collaboration in achieving the SDG agenda.

**Keywords:** Jainism, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Ahimsa, Environmental Ethics, Indigenous Wisdom

### **Introduction**

SDG stands for Sustainable Development Goals, established by the United Nations in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Each goal has specific targets and indicators to measure progress, and they apply to all countries—developed and developing alike. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were chosen by the United Nations after

years of global consultation to address the most urgent, interconnected challenges facing humanity and the planet.

### **Reasons of choosing the SDG Goals**

#### **1. Holistic Vision**

The SDGs aim to be comprehensive, tackling social, economic, and environmental issues together.

#### **2. Built on the MDGs**

The SDGs evolved from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which focused mainly on poverty, health, education, Inequality, Sustainability, peace, justice and Global partnerships.

#### **3. Global Participation**

The goals were developed with input from 193 countries, UN agencies, civil society, academics, and the private sector. The process included surveys, consultations, and negotiations to reflect global priorities.

#### **4. Urgency of Global Challenges**

Each goal addresses a pressing global issue that affects people now or will in the near future.

The UN. wanted to ensure the goals were:

1. Universal
2. Measurable
3. Time-bound

#### **5. Interconnectedness**

The 17 goals are designed to work together. These goals represent a unified global agenda to create a more sustainable world.

### **Jain philosophy**

has deep ethical principles that align beautifully with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Here's a goal-by-goal look at how Jain values and perspectives can contribute to achieving each SDG

### **17 Sustainable Development Goals According to United Nations**

#### **1. No Poverty**

**Issue:** Extreme poverty is driven by unemployment, inequality, conflict, and lack of access to education and health. Vulnerable groups especially in conflict zones and least-developed countries face structural barriers that perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

**Present-Day Scenario:** Despite global efforts, a significant person of the world's population lives below the poverty line, lacking access to basic necessities

**Jain Principle:** Aparigraha (non-possessiveness) which encourages limiting personal possessions and sharing excess wealth to help those in need.

## **2. Zero Hunger**

**Issue:** Hunger results from food insecurity, conflict, poor agricultural practices, and climate change. Malnutrition is a leading cause of child mortality worldwide.

**Present-Day Scenario:** More than 828 million people suffer from hunger. Conflict zones like Yemen, South Sudan, and parts of the Sahel are most affected. Global food prices remain volatile due to climate shocks and supply chain disruptions.

**Jain Principle:** Ahimsa (non-violence) which promotes vegetarianism and sustainable food systems that reduce harm to all living beings, which indirectly conserves resources and supports food security.

## **3. Good Health and Well-being**

**Issue:** Health inequalities, lack of infrastructure, and underfunded systems leave millions vulnerable to disease and poor care. Non-communicable diseases and mental health disorders are also on the rise.

**Present-Day Scenario:** While life expectancy has increased, disparities remain. Developing countries struggle with basic healthcare access. COVID-19 highlighted the fragility of health systems even in high-income countries, with global vaccination gaps still prevalent.

**Jain Practice:** Emphasis on self-discipline, vegetarianism, and non-addictive lifestyles contributes to physical and mental well-being.

## **4. Quality Education**

**Issue:** Lack of qualified teachers, inadequate facilities, and socioeconomic barriers limit access to education. Conflict and displacement further restrict learning for millions of children.

**Present-Day Scenario:** Around 244 million children and youth are out of school globally. The pandemic widened learning gaps, especially where digital access was limited. Girls, children with disabilities, and refugees are disproportionately affected.

**Jain Tradition:** Ancient Jain monks emphasized education, debate, and logic. Jain philosophy supports lifelong learning and spiritual development.

## **5. Gender Equality**

**Issue:** Women and girls face discrimination in education, employment, and leadership. Gender-based violence remains widespread and underreported.

**Present-Day Scenario:** Globally, women earn 23% less than men and occupy only about a quarter of parliamentary seats. Violence against women surged during lockdowns, and reproductive rights face setbacks in several regions.

**Jain View:** While traditional views vary, core Jain philosophy values the soul as genderless, supporting the idea that spiritual potential is equal for all.

## **6. Clean Water and Sanitation**

**Issue:** Billions lack access to safe water and sanitation. Pollution, poor infrastructure, and overuse of water sources exacerbate the crisis.

**Present-Day Scenario:** Over 2 billion people live without safely managed drinking water. Climate change and population growth is putting extreme pressure on freshwater resources. Waterborne diseases remain a major cause of death in low-income areas.

**Jain Practice:** Careful use of natural resources, especially water, is part of daily discipline, reducing wastage and encouraging hygiene.

## **7. Affordable and Clean Energy**

**Issue:** Over-reliance on fossil fuels, lack of infrastructure, and affordability issues hinder energy access. Clean energy transitions are slow in many regions.

**Present-Day Scenario:** 733 million people still lack access to electricity. Renewable energy use is growing, but fossil fuels still dominate the global energy mix. Energy demand spikes have increased costs, widening access gaps.

**Jain Principle:** Anekantavada (multiplicity of views) encourages open-minded, innovative approaches—supportive of clean technology development that avoids harm.

## **8. Decent Work and Economic Growth**

**Issue:** Unemployment, underemployment, and labour exploitation persist globally. Many workers lack social protection and work in unsafe conditions.

**Present-Day Scenario:** The global economy remains unstable post-pandemic, with youth unemployment exceeding 13%. The informal economy still dominates in many developing countries, offering little job security or benefits.

**Jain Ethics:** Business with ethics (Shravaka Dharma) promotes fair wages, honesty, and service to society—key to sustainable economies.

## **9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure**

**Issue:** Weak infrastructure and digital divides hinder development and innovation, especially in low-income countries. Industrial pollution also contributes to environmental degradation.

**Present-Day Scenario:** Global supply chains are fragile, and many countries still lack basic digital infrastructure. While high-tech industries thrive in developed nations, many others lag behind in manufacturing and technological advancement.

**Jain Value:** Emphasis on responsible innovation—development that avoids harm to humans, animals, and nature.

### **10. Reduced Inequalities**

**Issue:** Wealth, race, disability, and geographic location all contribute to systemic inequalities. Migration policies and social discrimination further marginalize certain populations.

**Present-Day Scenario:** Income inequality is rising in both developed and developing countries. Refugees and displaced people lack access to basic services. Global wealth distribution remains heavily skewed, with the richest 10% owning over 75% of global wealth.

**Jain Philosophy:** All souls are equal in potential. This promotes compassion and inclusion, countering discrimination and inequality.

### **11. Sustainable Cities and Communities**

**Issue:** Urban growth outpaces infrastructure development. Many cities face pollution, poor housing, traffic congestion, and inadequate public services.

**Present-Day Scenario:** Over 1 billion people live in slums. Cities like Lagos, Dhaka, and Jakarta struggle with overcrowding and air quality. Climate-related risks like flooding and heatwaves are also increasing urban vulnerability.

**Jain practice:** Simple living, minimizing consumption, and mindful community interactions support peaceful and sustainable urban life.

### **12. Responsible Consumption and Production**

**Issue:** The global economy is linear—take, make, dispose. This model leads to excessive waste, pollution, and resource depletion.

**Present-Day Scenario:** Each year, the world generates over 2 billion tons of waste. Only 9% of plastic ever produced has been recycled. Sustainable production models are gaining traction but are far from mainstream.

**Jain Principle:** Aparigraha again is key—consume less, want less, waste less. Encourages minimalism and sustainability.

### **13. Climate Action**

**Issue:** Greenhouse gas emissions from industry, agriculture, and transport drive global warming. Political inertia and economic interests delay meaningful action.

**Present-Day Scenario:** The Earth is on track for a 2.7°C increase by 2100, far beyond the Paris Agreement target. 2023 was one of the hottest years recorded. Wildfires, droughts, and storms are intensifying globally.

**Jain Principle:** Ahimsa extends to nature. Reducing harm means acting against pollution and climate change. Jains often lead by example in carbon-conscious living.

#### **14. Life Below Water**

**Issue:** Marine ecosystems are threatened by overfishing, plastic pollution, and ocean acidification. Coral reefs and fish stocks are in rapid decline.

**Present-Day Scenario:** Over 90% of big fish populations are depleted. Plastic is found in every corner of the ocean, including the deepest trenches. Marine biodiversity is declining faster than ever before.

**Jain Principle:** Respect for all forms of life—including aquatic—calls for preserving marine biodiversity and reducing water pollution.

#### **15. Life on Land**

**Issue:** Deforestation, land degradation, and poaching threaten biodiversity and ecosystems. Unsustainable agriculture and urban sprawl accelerate habitat loss.

**Present-Day Scenario:** Over 1 million species face extinction. Forests are being cleared at alarming rates in the Amazon, Congo Basin, and Southeast Asia. Land degradation affects one-third of the Earth's surface.

**Jain Principle:** Jiv Daya (compassion to all life) directly promotes conservation of forests, animals, and biodiversity.

#### **16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions**

**Issue:** Corruption, conflict, weak institutions, and lack of accountability undermine peace and justice. Human rights abuses remain widespread.

**Present-Day Scenario:** Violence, war, and political instability persist in regions like Ukraine, Myanmar, and parts of Africa. Over 100 million people are forcibly displaced. Many justice systems lack inclusivity and transparency.

**Jain Ethics:** Non-violence, truth, and forgiveness build personal and societal peace—foundations for just institutions.

#### **17. Partnerships for the Goals**

**Issue:** Sustainable development requires global cooperation, yet many partnerships lack funding, coordination, and commitment.

**Present-Day Scenario:** International aid fell short in 2023, and climate finance goals are unmet. North-South Cooperation is essential but oen imbalance. Global challenges like pandemics and climate change underscore the need for stronger multilateralism.

**Jain Value:** Syadvada (relativity of truth) promotes dialogue, cooperation, and respect for diverse views— essential for global partnerships.

### **Broad Jaina Solutions and Perspectives**

#### **Ahimsa**

The cardinal principle of Jainism is non-violence. It means giving respect or reverence to all forms of life. All life formations, including human beings, animals, plants, trees, insects etc., have the same life source of energy. This energy is available even in invisible creatures in air, water, wind and fire. Lord Mahavira says “Not to kill any living being is the quintessence of all wisdom. Certainly, one has to understand that non violence and equality of all living beings is the pivot on which its whole ethics revolves. Non-violence is not a single virtue but it is a combination of all virtues. Lord Mahavira says that non-violence is equated with sixty virtuous qualities like peace, harmony, welfare, trust, fearlessness, etc.' Jainism believes in the principle,” Live and Let live."

Today, when we see crueles on animals on a large scale in mechanical slaughter-houses and the use of animals for leather products, in food industries, in producing medicines, in cosmetics and so on, we can understand how important it is to adhere to nonviolence so as to save the life on this planet. The extensive development of meat industries has brought environmental degradation on a large scale and today Environmentalists are worried about how to stop it to make the lives of people healthy and happy. Recognising that total adherence to the strictest form of nonviolence is impractical for a householder; Jaina preachers have drawn a discon between violent activities totally forbidden and those, which may be tolerated within strict guidelines. From this standpoint, violence has been classified into the following four categories:

1. Deliberate or aggressive violence i.e., intentional killing.
2. Protective violence resulting from opposing the lack of one's life, property, or country.
3. Occupational violence resulting from industrial or agricultural activity of the individuals for earning their livelihood.

4. Unintentional but indirect injury to living beings from acts necessary for normal life like cooking or cleaning etc.

Non-violence has been beautifully explained in a verse by the renowned Acarya Amitaga of the 11th century AD as: "Friendship towards all beings, respect for the qualities of virtuous people, utmost compassion for the afflicted beings and equanimity towards those who are not well disposed towards me- may my soul have these dispositions for ever". Non-violence is the greatest need of the present. Faced with the danger of ecological disaster and nuclear holocaust on the one hand and unrestrained materialism pursuit on the other hand, humanity is groping in the dark for the ray of light, which can save its very existence. Such light is provided by shunning violence at all levels and by practicing non-violence.

### **Anekanta**

For social reconstruction, in fact for the survival of the society, voluntary limitation of desires and personal possessions is the only solution. Environmental degradation due to too much spread of consumerism can be checked only by the self-imposed discipline of limited desires and limited possessions. Amassing of wealth for the sake of accumulation will not help the individual nor the society: it is harmful for both, with increase in disparities leading to consequent evils of mental restlessness, jealousy, envy, desires) would check both poverty and luxury with the moon that corruption etc. The middle path of Iccha-parimana (limiting of possessions are only a means and not the end in themselves.”

Today due to the progress of science and technology, the world has practically become a single family. Hence, We should have broadness of our thoughts also. We cannot solve world problems with parochial outlook and sectarian thoughts also. The growth of scientific knowledge and outlook has destroyed most of our false dogmas and super sons but it has failed to provide us knowledge that could sublimate our animal and selfish nature. Hence, our life has become full of tensions, turmoil, and disorders. Therefore, although we are outwardly pleading for world peace and non-violence, yet inwardly we have been preparing for war. Humanity is towering today upon the brink of the principle of self-annihilation due to the lack of proper understanding which includes understanding ourselves and understanding the views of others. Reality has innumerable characteristics. All objects have innumerable characters; hence, all things are mul-dimensional of Anaikanta. One who knows only paral truth must not discard the views of others as totally false. Jaina theory of Anekantavada emphasises that all the approaches to understand the reality give a paral but true picture of reality and due to their



truth-value from a certain angle, we should treat other ideologies and faiths with equal regard. The virtue of understanding is very much needed in the present-day society. Jainism maintains regard for others' thoughts and ideologies from me immemorial. Lord Mahavira says, "Those who praise their own ideologies and faiths and blame that of their opponents and thus distort the truth will remain confined to the cycle of birth and death." Acarya Hemacandra says: "I bow to all those who have overcome attachment and aversion, which are causes of worldly bondage, be they Brahma, Visnu, Siva or Jina." "Jaina logic of Anekanta is based not on abstract intellectualism but on experience and realism leading to a non-absolute attitude of mind."

### **Aparigraha**

This principle has great importance in the present world. Jaina preachers say that the source of happiness and peace lies within the human self and not in the external things. The cause for mental worries and tensions are due to our attachment towards worldly objects. Lord Mahavira says that desires are endless like the sky and they will never satisfy any person fully, in his words, "If there were numberless mountains of gold and silver as big as Mount Kailasa. like the sky." Mahavira says the more you get, the more you want, desires increase with every gain. If mankind is to be freed from mental tensions, the possessions have to be limited. Today, we find over-exploitation of natural resources, which are available in limited quantities only. Jainism believes that the lesser the attachment, the greater will be the mental peace. It is only when attachment vanishes, the human mind will be free from mental and emotional disorders. Aparigraha is not merely an abstract philosophy, it is a vision of life with the solution to a number of problems that society is facing-economic, social, political, familial and personal. For social reconstruction, in fact for the survival of the society, Environmental degradation due to too much spread of consumerism can be checked only by the self-imposed discipline of limited desires and limited possessions. Amassing of wealth for the sake of accumulation will not help the individual nor the society: it is harmful for both, with increase in disparities leading to consequent evils of mental restlessness, jealousy, envy. corruption etc. The middle path of Iccha- parimana (limiting of desires) would check both poverty and luxury with the motto that possessions are only a means and not the end in themselves.

### **Conclusion**

In the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals, the ancient wisdom of Jainism offers a remarkably relevant compass. Rooted in the core values of Ahimsa (non-violence), Aparigraha

(non-possessiveness), and Anekantvad (multiplicity of viewpoints), Jain philosophy encourages a lifestyle that is deeply aligned with sustainability, equity, and ethical responsibility. These values naturally foster respect for life, care for the environment, and mindful consumption—all of which are central to achieving the SDGs.

A compelling example comes from the Jain tradition itself: centuries ago, Jain monks would carry a muhapatti (a cloth over the mouth) and sweep the path before walking—not out of ritual, but out of deep concern for even the tiniest forms of life. This profound sensitivity toward life reflects a mindset of interconnectedness and reverence that modern sustainable development aspires to cultivate.

In a world increasingly affected by climate change, resource depletion, and social inequalities, the Jain worldview reminds us that true progress is not measured merely by economic growth but by our ability to live in harmony with all beings. If these ancient principles are embraced in policy and practice today, they could guide humanity toward a future that is not only sustainable but also compassionate and wise.

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