



# **Christians & Jains to build a better future – by caring for the earth, the poor and the most vulnerable**

**Paper presented .....**

**Vatican, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2024**

**Rajeev Shah** BEng, MPhil (Cantab), MBA (Oxon), MA (Ladnun, India)

**Founder of JainTreasures and Trustee of Jain Vishva Bharati London**

## **CARING FOR THE EARTH**

How people treat the world is to some extent influenced by people's belief system. Jains postulate that the earth and all living beings therein are comprised of matter and soul, both of which are eternal and have no creator. The Jain doctrine further emphasises the equality of all souls such that there is no difference between our soul and the souls of any one sensed to five sensed living beings. The Acharanga Sutra explicitly states that “one who neglects or disregards the existence of earth, fire, air, water, vegetation disregards their own existence”. Just as we have kinship with our family, if we consider the entire universe as our family, it is inherently natural for the Jains to care for the earth.

Ecology includes the relationships between plants, animals, people and the environment. This perfectly ties in with the Jain doctrine as Jains take a holistic approach in which humans are part of a larger web of life and do not have a dominating jurisdiction over nature. This view aligns with the ecological principle that all species are interconnected, and that human survival is intertwined with the survival of the universe. Jain ethics has its foundation rooted in the recognition that the soul is present and equal in all life forms, not just in the human form, and therefore Jains are motivated by compassion and respect to care for the earth.

Jainism can be considered as a Coordinative Ecological Model as they believe in the equality of all souls and the interrelation between souls and matter. Of all the species in the universe, humans have gift to think, and they need to use this great gift of nature to protect nature and not use it against nature itself.

A holistic understanding of environmental responsibility needs to be combined with spiritual insight. The extreme reverence for life in Jainism is embodied by the principle of Ahimsa (non-violence) which encompasses Aparigraha (non-possessiveness) and Sanyam (restraint). These spiritual insights propounded by Lord Mahaveer, are absolutely essential for a sustainable future and are interwoven into the fabric of the Jain way of life. Jain laity take vows which includes looking after the planet, minimizing possessions, and following a holistic and vegetarian diet that enables friendship with not only all of humanity but also with plants, animals and one-sensed beings (earth, water, air and fire). The essence is to live a simple life so that others can simply live. Tattvartha Sutra mentions that we are all independent, yet interdependent and therefore need mutual respect, cooperation and care for all life forms. Thus, the Doctrine of Equality espoused by the Jains is fundamental for the protection and preservation of our mother Earth. Environmental protection is intrinsic, innate and inherent in Jainism driven by reverence for all life rather than responsibility laid down by a superior power advocating to look after the Earth.

## CARING FOR THE POOR

Christianity has a robust tradition of looking after the poor. It is based on the premise that those who serve Mankind, serve God as it is an expression of one's faith and love for God.

Jains do not have a concept of a creator God, thus Jain philanthropy is motivated by empathy as Jains consider all other souls identical to their own soul. Therefore, Jains connect with the less fortunate on a deeply personal level. Jain soteriology clearly illustrates that one should help the poor and the weak to attain liberation (Siddha Shila).

Caring for the poor requires charity which involves giving away what one has, be it wealth, possession or knowledge. However, when the giving up of one's ownership is accompanied by absence of desire of reward for charity then the height of charity is achieved.

Jain scriptures mention four types of charity conducive for spiritual upliftment.

- (i) Supatra Dana – charity to the worthy with devotion and humility. In this, the recipient is a far more virtuous person than the donor. The donor hopes to reduce their greed and hopes to imbibe the virtues of the recipient who are selfless and benevolent. Moreover, all philanthropic activities specifically related for **spiritual** upliftment of others would be classified in this type of charity.
- (ii) Abhaya Dana – charity of fearlessness. This involves living a life in such a manner that all living beings feel safe and secure in their presence. Amazingly, no external resource is required for this kind of charity. All can do this, rich or poor, old or young, saints or lay people. What is challenging is that every mental, vocal and physical action needs to be benevolent and non-harmful to any life form. It is surely not possible to lead an absolute puritanical lifestyle, however, Jain laity strive to practice it to the best of their ability having the best of intentions.
- (iii) Gyana Dana - Just as doctors work selflessly for others' well-being, gyana dana is performing any activity that can enhance other people's knowledge (although spiritual knowledge is the key as it leads to liberation). Sermons by all Jain saints are united for the **spiritual** upliftment of their followers as it is only through faith and knowledge that one's conduct can be ideal. Knowledge is the intrinsic nature of the soul and therefore spiritual knowledge is essential to know oneself.
- (iv) Anukampa Dana – compassionate charity. The main aim is to alleviate the pain and suffering of people and animals. Here there is no distinction between caste, colour, creed, donor or donee.

Thus, caring for the poor or less fortunate is an integral part of the Jain way of living driven by equality and empathy towards one and all and not motivated by any reward or pleasing God.

## **CARING FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE**

Vulnerable means those who are most susceptible to harm, damage or attack. For the Jains, harming others is equivalent to harming oneself. This notion extends to the earth, all plants, animals and the natural resources. Jains therefore have a strong ethical code of not exploiting others. This principle has in recent era been exemplified by Srimad Rajchandra who in a business transaction realizing that the other party would be vulnerable in exercising his business contract, said “I can drink milk, but not others blood” and tore up the contract at the expense of financial gain. The Vandittu Sutra, recited during the Pratikramana ritual of the Svetambara Jains elaborates on self-reflection and introspection on any transgressions committed against various vows and practices. This reminds that one should act morally and ethically and not exploit any humans or animals.

Acharya Kundakunda stated that since one's mind (naturally) gets afflicted by grief or distressed at the sight of the thirsty, the hungry and the miserable, one offers relief to them, out of pity (kripa) which is compassion (anukampa) and generates good karma (punya). Thus, the Jain ethical code of living ensures that even in an imperfect world where a puritanical lifestyle may not be possible, every effort must be made to lead a virtuous life and look after the most vulnerable which includes not only other humans, but also plants, animals and entire nature.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Christianity & Jainism as Ecological Models” by Arvind Sharma
2. Tattvartha Sutra
3. Jainism the Cosmic Vision by Kumarpal Desai
4. Acharanga Sutra
5. Manhopanishad
6. Nandi Sutra English Translation by Dipratnasagar
7. Institute of Jainology “The Birth of the Spiritual Leader Who Gave Us Ahimsa”
8. Dasvaikalika Sutra
9. Vandittu Sutra
10. Concept of Divinity in Jainism by Kothari.
11. Jaina Philosophy & Religion by Nyayavijay.
12. Aspirants Guide by Atmanandji
13. Positive Non-violence by Lodha and Baya
14. Adhyatmagyan Praveshika by Atmanandji Maharaj
15. Yogasastra
16. Sutrakritanga Sutra
17. Essence of Jaina Scriptures by Jagdish Jain