



e-ISSN: 2319-8753 | p-ISSN: 2347-6710

# IJRSET

International Journal of Innovative Research in  
**SCIENCE | ENGINEERING | TECHNOLOGY**

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INNOVATIVE RESEARCH

IN SCIENCE | ENGINEERING | TECHNOLOGY

Volume 10, Issue 11, November 2021

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

Impact Factor: 7.569

9940 572 462

6381 907 438

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# From the Roots to the Soul: Exploring the Significance of Vegetation in Jainism

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**ABSTRACT:** Jain religion is an old Indian religion that advocates the noble virtues of universal kindness, equality, and brotherhood. With The doctrine of Ahimsa Parmo Dharm and motto of Jeo aur jeene do, Jain philosophy lays emphasis on conservation and preservation of all life on Earth. The present paper explains the various rules followed by the followers of this religion and elucidates how they advocate and emphasize vegetation protection and conservation.

**KEYWORDS:** Jain religion, Jain philosophy, vegetation, biosphere, Ahimsa, conservation

## I. INTRODUCTION

Vegetation is a general term used for assemblage of botanical life forms and the spatial extent of the ground cover they provide. The term 'Vegetation' is commonly used for a plant community or plant life of an area which has grown naturally with or without human aid; and is influenced by various ecological factors like climate, soil and availability of water. Since the evolution of Human race, natural vegetation has been the basis of fulfillment of elementary necessity of food, clothing and shelter. Natural vegetation is the geographical index of an area and provides life to all other living beings.

Being primary producers, plant cover or vegetation has the capacity to produce food or complex carbons through photosynthesis. During the process of photosynthesis, chlorophyll of plants, in the presence of sunlight, absorbs atmospheric carbon dioxide, breaks the water of leaves into Oxygen and Hydrogen. Oxygen, required for breathing, is released back to the atmosphere. Oxygen is the life giving gas for all living beings. By formation of ozone sphere, oxygen also protects us from the harmful solar radiations. The hydrogen released during photosynthesis combines with the absorbed atmospheric carbon dioxide to produce complex carbohydrates which as food form essential factors for the survival of any life form. During this process it also absorbs the poisonous atmospheric gas carbon dioxide and produces oxygen, thereby converting poison into life saving gas oxygen and so plants become the source of formation of Ambersia or 'Amrit'. Plants, as producers of complex carbohydrates help in the cycling of nutrients and energy in every ecosystem of any dimension. Vegetation improves water quality and water storage, moderates floods, checks soil erosion and provides wildlife habitats. It is a source of natural raw materials for various processes and products. Vegetation as a source of spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic experience is also a major tourist attraction. Vegetation, therefore, is the basis of all life - man, animals, and plants.

The enormous population of India requires at least 40% of the country's total area to be covered by forests but according to 2019 assessment only 25% of India's total area was under forest and vegetative cover. Only 9.5% of the geographical area of Rajasthan is under forests. The existence of vegetation is utmost for human existence. But Man in his race for economic and technological development has been neglecting the conservation of biosphere and is destroying it through extensive cutting of local vegetation and deforestation. Negative impacts of this over exploitation of our biosphere can be felt. Increasing areas are experiencing sub - Saharan conditions. The annual, seasonal and daily range of temperature is increasing. Latitudinal rules are changing. Intensity and severity of floods and droughts is increasing. In the absence of vegetation, millions of tons of top soil is getting eroded, leading to reduction in agriculture production whereby causing problems of food scarcity for the increasing population.

Jainism, the ancient Indian religion, has the doctrine of 'Ahimsa' at the centre of the moral code of conduct. 'Ahimsa Parmo Dharm' emphasizes that the path to 'moksh' or enlightenment is through nonviolence and non injury to all living beings including plants and animals. 'Jeo or jeene do', i e. live and let live is the Motto of Jainism. Every one of us wants to live, enjoy pleasures and escape pain, similarly every other living being also wants to live, enjoy comforts and avoid pain. If we want to exercise our right to live we must concede the same right to the others. It is a simple moral law of reciprocity. Man has no right to harm or kill other living beings for his food or his pleasure. By his superiority in the cadre of biological evolution, his action is not justifiable in any way. If he wants to lead a life of



justice and equity in society he must have the highest respect for the entire living world and should maintain the sanctity of all life. Jainism as a religion believes in the independence of the soul combined with the belief of an eternal universe or matter. Austerities of various kinds are prescribed in Jainism and a pious Jain is expected to observe different austerities such as fasting, eating less than once fill, putting restrictions on the use and accumulation of possessions. The propounders of Jain religion, the 24 'Tirthankars', have all advocated for the protection of all life, including vegetation, through *Ahimsa* (nonviolence), *Satya*(truth), *Asteya*(non-stealing), *Brahmcharya*(chastity) and *Aparigrah*(non-possessiveness).

Jain culture is an, 'Aranya Sanskriti' and is based on forests or vegetation. The 'lok' or World is a gigantic tree. Humanity occupies a small part of this tree, the 'Jumbudweep' in this lok and since its evolution has depended on trees called 'kalpataru'. Human civilization began with humanisation or taming of Nature - both plants and animals. 'Bharat Bahubali Mahakavya' of 17th century describe in details the trees, forests and nature and how they were conserved during that time. 'Adi purana' also describes the dense forest cover of India..Bhagwati Aradhana directs a 'muni' or saint to walk two feet away from the green grass and to never walk on the surface laden with seeds, fruits or flowers. The 'sadhana sthal' of all teerthankars has been trees and forests.

## II. LIFE IN JAIN PHILOSOPHY

The doctrine of nonviolence and non injury led the Jain teachers to study in detail the whole range of the living world and to classify the various living beings under different grades according to the development and sense faculties. This was a practical necessity if injury to living beings had to be avoided. Living beings according to Jain philosophy fall into two broad classes - *Trisha* or mobile and *Sthavara* or immobile. '*Indriya*' character provides life to every matter or dravya. Indriyas are 5 in number - body, tongue, nose, eyes and ears. These are the five senses that make matter a living organism. Tongue for taste, nose for smell, eyes for site, ears for hearing and body for physical appearance and touch. On the basis of these indriyas Jain philosophy divides all life into 5 types

- Ekindriya - having only body, like the plants
- Dviindriya - having tongue and body, like caterpillars
- Teen indriya - having nose tongue and body, as in ants
- Choindriya - having eyes, nose, tongue and body, like in snakes
- Punch indriya - having ears, eyes, nose, tongue, and body, like human beings.

Trasa beings are those which possess two, three, four and five indriyas or sense organs. Sthavara beings are those which have only ek indriya, one sense organ - that of touch. Sthavaras are of five types: earth bodied, water bodied, fire bodied, air bodied and vegetation. Jain teachers had long back realised that plants had life and Jain philosophy considers plants as ekindriyajeev - one sensed beings.

से बेमि इमंपि जा इधम्मयं एयंपि  
जा इधम्मयं इमंपि वुद्धिपम्मयं  
इमंपि चित्तमंतयं एयंपि चित्तमंतयं  
इमंपि छिन्न मिलाति एयंपि छिन्न मिलाती  
इमंपि आहारंग एयंपि आहारंग  
इमंपि चओवचइयं एयंपि चओवचइयं  
इमंपि विपरिणाम धम्मयं एयंपि विपरिणाम धम्मयं

The above couplet of Acharang sutra describes vegetative life. Vegetation is a living organism as any other life - like human beings. Like humans plants also take birth, grow and die. They need food - in terms of water and soil nutrients - to survive. Plants also develop illness and feel pain when pricked or cut, and so in accordance to the basic doctrine of Ahimsa, should not be unnecessarily harmed or killed.





सव्वे पाणा सव्वे भूता सव्वे जीवा सव्वे सत्ता ण हंतव्वा  
पाण पाणे क्लिंसंति बहुदुक्खा हू जंतवो।

The Jain 'Acharanga' or method of behaviour says that no life must be killed for it will increase the trouble of every living organism. Acharang sutra also directs people to take great care of all beings during their journey from place to place - including tiny organisms and natural vegetation.

पुढवि च आउकायं च तैउकायं च वायुकायं च ।  
पणगाई बीयह रियाइं तसकायं च सव्वयो णच्चा ॥

### III. PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION

While studying the animate world in detail the Jain teachers realised that complete abstinence from injury to beings in a strict sense was practically impossible. Not every individual could avoid injury to living beings in an absolute sense. The religious devotees, according to Jainism, are broadly divided into two groups, namely, the monks or munis and householders or Shravaks. A monk observes the vow of Ahimsa very strictly. A muni avoids all kinds of harm to all life, both Trasa and Sthavara. In fact he is not liable to any injury to living beings even in their potentiality as his diet. In his food he does not use seeds which are capable of germinating plants. In the case of householders the strictness is slightly less. Due to social obligations and practical duties, it is not always possible for him to avoid injury. A shravak does his best and avoids injury to Trisha beings. It is not always possible for him to avoid injury to Sthavara beings. But even there he is directed to minimise the harm. The shravak law restricts the uses of living organisms, including vegetation, Fourteen laws have been given in Shravak Dharm to be followed in the daily life of all Shravaks (Jain devotees), of which the first law is of commodity conservation.

सच्चित्तदव्व विग्गईपत्तीताम्बुल - वत्थ - कुमुमेसु।  
वाहण - समण - विलेवणवम्भदिशीनाहणभत्तेसु।

It calls for controlled use of all natural resources including seeds, cereals, fruits, nuts and flowers.

तत्थखलु भगवया परिण्णापवैदियाइ मस्सचैतजीवियस्स  
परिवंदणमाणणपूयणाएजाइ मरणमोयणाए  
दुक्खपडीयायहैंउं  
सेसय मेववणस्सति सत्थंसमारंभइ  
अण्णेवावणस्सति सत्थंसमारंभमाणे समतुजाणाति  
तंसेअहियाएतंसेअवोहिण्ण

Another couplet prohibits the use of vegetation, fruits and flowers for personal propaganda, publicity and worship. It is a Paap (sin) to kill these ek indriyajeev or plants and misuse of the above may lead to misfortune.

एसखलुगंधेएसखलुमोहेएसखलुमारेएसखलुणिरए।  
वणस्सइसत्थंसमारंभमाणेअण्णेअणेगरुवेपाणेविहंसइ।

In the 'shravak Dharm' all consumable articles are grouped into 26 categories known as 'parimaan'. The 9th parimaan - पुष्प विहि परिमाण (flowers), 17th parimaan - सान विहि परिमाण (green vegetables), and 18th parimaan is - माहुर विहि परिमाण or citrus fruits. A shravak should not make use of any of these. The Jains avoid their use during vrats (fasts), in Paryushan Parv and during Daslakahan Mahaparv. Jain philosophy talks of 15 types of Occupations for livelihood. These are called fifteen Karmadaan. of these three are prohibited to lay emphasis on vegetation conservation.

- इंगालकम्मे - Burning of vegetation for coal or energy
- वणकम्मे - selling of trees and use of vehicles
- दवग्गिदावणियाकम्मे -burning of forests.



Adi purana says that like munis or saints, irrespective of all adversities of climate and nature, plants work for the welfare of all living organisms. As primary producers they are the basis of all ecosystems and their survival. Adipurana highlights the importance of vegetation and forests, some of which can be put down as

- Plants as primary producers provide food for the survival of all living beings
- Natural vegetation enhances humidity, attracts rainfall and moderates local climates.
- Vegetation checks water quality, water storage and river run off.
- Vegetation increases and maintains soil productivity.
- Vegetation or forests provide shelter, habitat, and niche areas for other life forms.
- The biosphere is a source of fuel and Timber.
- Forests provide raw materials for industries and several medicines come from plants and trees.
- Forests and natural vegetation provide scenic beauty and aesthetic value.

Since ancient times, like rivers, forests have also acted as natural boundaries of various administrative areas, and regions were named in accordance to the local vegetation. In the various Jain sutras, Kings and administrators have been directed to take care of and conserve forests. An example is 'Muni Seemandar Swami' who played an active role in the protection and conservation of the decaying tree of kalptaru. Despite all the laws and directives, humanity has been ruthless in its exploitation of the biosphere. Increasing population, expanding agriculture, industrialization, urbanization have led to extensive cutting of trees and deforestation. Increase of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and environmental imbalances are threatening life on earth. This decaying of nature has been explained in the following lines

क्वचिद गिरिसरित्पूरं प्रावर्तन्त महारमा।  
धातुरागारूणा मुक्ता रक्तमोक्षा इवादिषु।।  
ध्वंनंतो व वृषुर्मुक्त स्थूल धार पयोधरा।  
रूदन्त इज शीकार्ता कल्पवृक्ष परिक्षये।।

If we have to protect life on Earth it is a must that we conserve and save vegetation and biodiversity. Jain philosophy and religion has paid excessive emphasis on the preservation of all life forms including plants by giving scientific measures to protect and save them. Need for food to grow and survive and sense of feelings make plants living organisms too.

पढविककाया सव्वे संवेदणां समकिरिया  
and  
अणु समयं अविरहिण्ण अहारट्टे समुपज्जई

In Bhagwati Sutra all 'kayas' or bodies have been said to have equal sense of feelings. Herein comes the doctrine of Ahimsa or nonviolence towards all living beings - Not only physically but also by thought or words - अहिंसा - मन से, वचन से, काया से.

Aacharang sutra insists on the coexistence of all life - human life, animal life and plant life, and lays emphasis on the conservation and protection of vegetation for the survival of human race. Plantation as an activity has been prescribed for earning 'Punya' and trees have been designated as sons of the family.

पुत्रा संवत्सर सयान्ते श्रीद्धं कुर्वन्ति वा न वा ।  
प्रत्यहं पापा पुष्टि श्रेयो ज्यं जनयति हि ।।  
सदा सदा से तीर्थो भावति सदा दान प्रवलति ।  
सदा यज्ञमजते तो रोपयति पादपा ।।

Trees have been called faithful sons as during the entire course of their life they keep providing. The trees also have a longer life span than normal living organisms so that other life forms can enjoy the benefits for a longer period



of time. Growing and taking care of Plants also helps people come closer to Nature and to God All Mighty. Taking care of trees and protecting them has been given the name of a '*yajna*'. Bhavishya Puran advocates that cutting of trees must be considered equivalent to cutting of a life and the cutter must be punished as a murderer.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

As written in Bhavishya Puran, either protect vegetation or otherwise perish. The need of the hour is to manage human use of the biosphere in a way that it yields greatest benefits for the present generation and at the same time meets the needs and aspirations of the future generations. It has been emphasized by Jain philosophy that the preservation of biological resources is essential for the well being and survival of not only Mankind but of the Earth as a whole.

अहिंसा परमो धर्म - Ahimsa parmo dharm,

जीओ और जीने दो - Jeeyo aur jeene do

and

परस्पर ग्रहों जीवाणाम - Paraspar-graho-jeevanam

emphasize the noble virtues of universal kindness, equality, brotherhood and advocate the Jain religious philosophy of coexistence and survival.

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