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Religious Doctrines And Environmental Sustainability

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Abstract

This study investigates the intersection of hermeneutics with the ethical frameworks of Jainism and Hinduism, with a focus on their relevance to contemporary environmental sustainability discourse. Employing a hermeneutic methodology, the study interprets verses from foundational texts of these two Indian religious traditions to extract principles conducive to ecological sustainability. Central concepts such as non-violence, religious duties and sacredness of nature have been examined through interpretive lenses to uncover their ecological significance. Through an examination of religious verses, this paper highlights the contributions of these religions to modern sustainability practices. This paper explores how the ancient Indian traditions of Jainism and Hinduism provide ethical, and practical frameworks that align with the principles of sustainable development. By examining these traditions not merely as repositories of spiritual belief, but as dynamic systems of ecological ethics, the study seeks to contribute to the growing interdisciplinary dialogue between religion, philosophy, and environmental studies. The study proposes that religious literacy should be enhanced in terms of its significance for environmental conservation thereby proposing a pathway of environmental sustainability grounded in ethical worldviews, demonstrating how ancient religious philosophies can inform and enrich contemporary sustainability paradigms.

Keywords: Jainism, Hinduism, Environment, Sustainability, Interdependence.

1. Introduction

The 21st century faces unprecedented environmental and social challenges, including climate change, loss of biodiversity and resource depletion. Overconsumption and excessive waste generation is resulting in destruction of ecosystems. Unsustainable development is a planetary problem and needs to be addressed on urgent basis. "The long-term sustainability of the environment is vital for the survival of humanity. It is essential that we conserve our ecosystem and habitats in order to sustain life on this planet, particularly human life. The current pace of destruction is substantially greater than the ability of ecosystems to recover

and this must be reversed as quickly as possible” (Kumar et al, 2022). In addition to economic growth and social inclusion, conservation of environment is an important aspect of sustainable development. Environmental sustainability implies that we manage our natural resources in a manner which meets our present needs as well as needs of future generations. This means adoption of practices which maintain ecological balance and minimize negative impact on environment. A number of strategies are being implemented by the government agencies to promote eco-friendly development. Public participation is essential for success of all such efforts. The integration of ethical and cultural values into sustainability discourse through behavioural change is essential for long-term success. Religious traditions, as repositories of moral and ecological wisdom, can inspire behavioral change among the masses. In contemporary times, indigenous and religious knowledge systems are gaining importance for providing sustainable solutions. Narayanan(2013) envisions “three roles which religion can play in sustainable development. First, through some important values that religion can offer, second, through its potential for activism and third in the more personal realm of self-development. The self may be regarded as the smallest unit of the function of sustainability; seen this way, it then also becomes the very core of the function of sustainability.” Tucker (2004) opines that “religion is a key adherent for the environmental emergency calls and the different religions of the world have to return to their ethical imperatives for sustaining environment as a voice of global community. Religion has the potential to leverage social and individual responses towards environmental concerns.” In line with these views, attempt has been made in this study to interpret few verses within Jain and Hindu traditions through hermeneutic approach. As humanity grapples with escalating ecological crises, there is a pressing need to explore alternative paradigms that transcend technocratic models of development. In this context, religious and philosophical traditions, particularly those rooted in Indian culture, offer profound insights for restoring ecological balance. Jainism and Hinduism, with their extensive theological and philosophical systems, articulate ethical orientations toward nature that are inherently sustainable. In particular, this study highlights how the interpretive engagement with concepts such as ahimsa, dharma, and belief that nature is sacred can inform and inspire ethical responses to the current ecological crisis. This paper examines the principles, practices, and contemporary relevance of Jainism and Hinduism in promoting environmental sustainability. This study focuses on those concepts which shape the attitude of followers of these religions towards sustainable development. Religious and philosophical traditions have long addressed themes of environmental stewardship, ethical living, and social responsibility. This study sheds light on practical knowledge imparted by religious traditions in context of environmental conservation. This following sections in this paper draw contextual meanings of religious verses and their significance for environmental sustainability.

2. Justification for the study.

The principles of sustainable development are deeply embedded in ancient religious and cultural practices. The ancient Indian texts are a rich reserves of sustainable practices. In the wake of industrialization and globalization these practices have taken a backseat. This article is an attempt to draw attention towards the religious practices which have sustainability at their core.

3. Objectives of the Study

- To explore the connections between environmental sustainability and core ethics of Jainism and Hinduism
- To draw parallels between environmental sustainability practices of Jainism and Hinduism.

4. Research Methodology

This article is based on qualitative approach called Hermenutics. It is a qualitative research tradition which focuses on interpretation and understanding of original text. . Hermeneutics is a philosophical methodology concerned with interpretation, particularly of texts. It offers a vital framework for re-engaging ancient wisdom traditions in addressing modern global challenges Through this lens, ancient scriptures are not static artifacts, but living texts whose meanings can evolve in response to contemporary exigencies. Applying hermeneutics to understand sustainability in religious traditions allows for contextual re-reading of ancient texts in light of current environmental problems and integration of traditional wisdom with modern ecological practices. In the present study attempt has been made to interpret selected verses from Jain and Hindu Ancient literature in context of sustainable development.

5. Jainism and Environmental Doctrines

Jainism is one of the oldest religions in the world. It has made profound contributions to Indian culture, philosophy, and spirituality and has a rich philosophical and spiritual tradition that emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with nature and promoting sustainable development. It is a way of life involving meditation and non-violence. It teaches that all living beings are equal and should be treated with compassion and respect. Its core value is ahimsa (non-violence), which guides the actions of followers of this religion. Violence in any form or situation is strictly rejected. The principles of Jainism, such as non-violence, non-possessiveness, and self-control have significant implications for sustainable development and environmental conservation. Baralia(2012) mentions that “Iriyāvahiya Sūtra teaches us non-violence which means if we have hurt any life knowingly or unknowingly then we should seek forgiveness. Excessive consumption, unrestricted use and lack of self- control has resulted in wastage of natural resources and therefore, Jain precepts suggests to follow a culture of necessity rather than enjoyment which means that all life is based on mutual interdependence”. Patil(2008) states that Jain ecological consciousness is grounded in a judicious blend of divine holism and vision of non-exploitative science and technology. Religion and science must go hand in hand and chart a single path to guide human spirituality in the direction of our planet and conservation of its resources. The scientific approach, reasoning, and practices prescribed by Jainism are highly relevant today when environmental concerns are on the top of human agenda. “The Jain tradition of ecological awareness and sustainability has been well documented over the last 25 years, although its roots lie deep in Indian history, specifically in texts such as the Tattvārtha Sūtra and Ācārāṅga Sūtra. This traditional body of knowledge includes a long-standing theory and practice of personal, social and environmental sustainability, addressing such views as the interconnectedness of humans and the laws of nature, the interdependence of everything in the universe, the responsibility of humans to conserve and preserve natural resources, the avoidance of unnecessary waste generation, and a general aversion to mistreating or abusing the environment” (Fergusen et.al., 2018). Acharanga Sutra is the first Anga Sutra. The central theme of this scripture is ahimsa. The concept of ahimsa extends extends to all living beings including plant and animals “ A wise man should not harm plant bodied beings himself, neither make others do so, nor approve of others doing so”(Sthavir, 2010). “Ahimsā paramo dharmaṃ ” is the cardinal principle of Jainism. To further elaborate on the above views, Jain aphorisms with interpretations are as follows:

5.1. Aphorism (i): "Jīvā jīvassa na himsai." (Ācārāṅga Sūtra 1.6)

5.1.1 Interpretation: This is the cardinal principle of Jainism which emphasizes that a living being should not harm other living beings. It is not just a moral guideline but an ecological directive also. Through a hermeneutic lens, this verse promotes a worldview where all life forms are important. There is mutual interdependence on each other. These teachings guide the individuals to adopt lifestyles which promote ecological balance and do not result in causing harm to nature.

5.2. Aphorism (ii) : “Savve pāṇo jīvā loie, te na haṇṇā, vairam ca na kāvei” (All living beings in the world should not be killed, nor enmity practiced toward them).” (Ācārāṅga Sūtra .1.1.1–5)

5.2.1. Interpretation: This verse puts forth the intrinsic value of life and emphasizes biodiversity preservation and environmental stewardship. It highlights the Jain principle that all beings have an equal right to live, aligning with the ethos of sustainability. (Jacobi, 1884)

5.3. Aphorism (iii) : “Yathā na kāmenyamanā jīvam hantavyam ca na yācā pīḍā karaṇam” (One should not kill living beings out of desire, one should also not cause suffering through greed or indulgence) (Tattvartha Sutra, 7.13)

5.3.1. Interpretation: This verse critiques excessive materialism and consumption, linking directly to modern sustainability concerns such as overexploitation of resources. Hermeneutically, it aligns with the principle of aparigraha (non-possession), advocating for restraint and ecological responsibility. (Tatia, 1994))

5.4. Aphorism (iv) : “Parasparograho Jivanam” (All living beings are interdependent) (Tattvārtha Sūtra 5.21:)

5.4.1. Interpretation: According to Jain (2006) all souls should render service to one another. All living beings are mutually beneficial for one another. Co-operation helps in proper functioning of the society. This is one of the core principles of Jainism which points towards interdependence of life all forms. All human beings should care for nature and strive to maintain ecological balance.

All the aforementioned aphorisms reflect the notion that the natural world is a sacred and interconnected web of life, and that humans have a responsibility to protect and preserve it. The core principle of Jainism is fundamentally rooted in the principle of ahimsa. Strong connections can be drawn between the principle of non-violence in Jainism and environmental sustainability. The followers of this religion believe that no harm should be caused to even the smallest of living beings. This ethic fosters deep respect for biodiversity and environmental stewardship. These practices reduce ecological footprints and align with modern sustainability goals. The principle of non-possessiveness encourages minimalism and detachment from material possessions, aligning with sustainable consumption and reduced ecological footprints. In contemporary society, the rise of consumerism has resulted in depletion of natural resources. Jain ethics offer an alternative worldview of peaceful living, compassion and non-violence. These ethics provide an environment friendly model beneficial for all living beings.

6. Hinduism and Environmental Ethics

Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions. The philosophical foundations of Hinduism encompass a diverse range of texts and traditions, including the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Puranas. Central to Hindu cosmology is the interconnectedness of all life forms and reverence for nature as divine. Dwivedi (1997) opines that “Atharva Veda is perhaps the first of its kind of scripture in any spiritual tradition where the concept of respect to Earth has been propounded. An entire chapter consisting of 63 verses has been devoted to praise of the Mother Earth”. The First Sukta of Atharveda is dedicated to Mother Earth. This Sukta is also known as Bhumi Sukta or Prithvi Sukta. Protecting nature is seen as part of one's moral and spiritual obligations. In many other hindu scriptures the duties towards environment have been outlined for individual as well societal well- being. The rivers, trees and plants are held in reverence and are worshipped. The tradition of worshipping trees, rivers and animals offers a unique perspective for sustainable development and environmental conservation. These traditions emphasize the unity of all life and our shared responsibility to protect the environment. Like Jainism, Hinduism also upholds the principle of ahimsa. Many Hindus adopt vegetarian diets and promote animal welfare, reducing the ecological impact of food systems. The belief in karma and reincarnation reinforces the idea that harmful actions towards nature have long-term consequences, promoting ethical behavior and sustainability. This ancient concept emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the environment. It encourages a sense of responsibility and stewardship towards the natural world. Few selected Hindu Verses and their interpretations are as follows:

6.1. Verse (i): Mātā bhūmih putro'ham prthivyāḥ (Earth is our mother) (*Atharva Veda* 12.1.12)

6.1.1. Interpretation: This verse from the Atharva Veda promotes an intimate, filial relationship with the Earth. It outlines the deep connection between earth and human beings in the form of mother and son. Hermeneutically, it aligns with the notion of ecological responsibility and stewardship, treating the planet as a sacred maternal presence. (Chand, 1982)

6.2. Verse (ii) : Īśāvāsyam idam sarvaṁ yat kiñca jagatyām jagat.(All creations are divine in nature) (*Isha Upanishad*, Verse 1)

6.2.1. Interpretation: From the Isha Upanishad, this verse underscores the immanence of the divine in all of creation. Hermeneutically, it suggests a sacred ontology of nature, encouraging reverence and non-exploitation as spiritual duties, aligning directly with environmental ethics and sustainability. (Easwaran, 2015)

6.3. Verse (iii): “Sukapanaam tadagaanam prapanaam cha parantapa.Sarasaam chiva bhaitaro nara nirayagaaminah” (The person who pollutes the water bodies like rivers and lakes goes to hell) (*Padmapurana*, Bhumi Khand 96.7.8)

6.3.1. Interpretation: Hermeneutically it can be interpreted that indulging in activities which cause water pollution are considered as sin. People indulging in such activities will have to face severe consequences hence all individuals should refrain from such activities and preserve the water bodies.

6.4. Verse (iv): “Yad bhūmi! tvatto 'ham khudāmi, tan ni te prṣṭhe ninayāmy aham.” (Whatever I dig from mother earth, I should place it back.) (*Atharveda* 12.1.35)

6.4.1. Interpretation: This verse puts forth the notion one should not indulge in any action which leads to excessive extraction of various things from earth. Care should be taken not to harm the core of earth. One

should ask for forgiveness for actions which result in exploitation of land and should pray that there should be quick recovery of things. Hermeneutically, it implies that all activities are based on reciprocal relationship which means that human beings should not only use earth's resources but should also restore and replenish the resources. This verse emphasizes on ecological responsibility and inculcation of environmental ethics.

Thus the important message from all these scriptures is respect or nature and all natural resources such as land, water, hills, forest and all other living beings. Environment has been perceived as a friendly abode in the Vedic literature (Sarma, 2015). Hinduism, with its vast corpus of sacred scriptures offers multiple narratives and principles relevant to sustainability. A hermeneutic approach helps reinterpret these texts to address modern environmental concerns. Dharma, a central concept in Hindu ethics, denotes duty and righteousness. Interpreted ecologically, dharma includes responsibilities toward nature and future generations.

7. Parallels between Jainism and Hinduism

Many parallels can be drawn between both Jainism and Hinduism which support environmental ethics. The concept of non-violence towards all beings, encourages compassionate living. Both religions recognize the unity of all life forms, fostering a sense of environmental responsibility wherein nature is considered to be sacred and worthy of protection. The common notions of compassion towards all living beings and preservation of environment in both religions align with minimalism and sustainable consumption. Both view actions as having consequences that impact not only individuals but the environment. These commonalities provide a strong ethical and philosophical basis for environmental sustainability and sustainable development policies that resonate with religious communities. The ethical codes in both religion give prime importance to preservation of environment at the individual as well as societal level. Together both religions offer holistic models for environmental sustainability grounded in both individual ethics and collective action. The ideas of exercising control over desires and not causing a harm to nature in both religions also discourages any kind of accumulation of material wealth which again can be linked to avoiding overconsumption and preservation of natural resources.

8. Conclusion

In the present eco-crisis humanity has to look for radical solutions which can be determined only through our values, priorities and choices. Jainism and Hinduism offer profound philosophical and practical resources for advancing environmental sustainability. Their emphasis on non-violence, minimalism, reverence for nature, and ethical responsibility resonates with global sustainability goals. Through ahimsa, dharma, and a deep ecological consciousness, these traditions offer models for harmonious living. By integrating these spiritual traditions into environmental discourse and practice, societies can cultivate a more holistic and enduring approach to sustainability. Kar & Tripathy (2022) opine that “the contemporary problems are due to our alienated form of life from religious influence. When science started revealing the secrets of nature, humanity gradually lost faith in theistic religions. Consequently moral and spiritual values were also discarded. Since the Industrial Revolution and the consequent acquisition of wealth through technological exploitation of nature, humanity has become more and more materialistic. In the present eco-crisis humanity has to look for radical solutions and that can be determined only through our values, priorities and choices. The human beings should reappraise its value system.” Religious ethics provide moral guidelines or environmental conservation. Religious literacy with special reference to texts related to respect for nature can be one of the sustainable solutions for preservation of environment.

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