

Religion & Society:

Non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH): *A Medicine For The Ailing Environment*

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In Jainism, non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH) is one of the five virtues. The illustrious poet, William Wordsworth, has pointed out that indulgence in materialism is not the real purpose of life. He writes:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

In this article, the insightful thinker, Shri Surendra Bothra, points out that practicing the virtue of non-possessiveness can alleviate much of mankind's problems regarding the environment. - D. C. J.

Introduction

In the modern world, consumerism is the major cause of the rapid degradation of the environment. It is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it rapidly depletes natural resources, polluting and damaging the environment. On the other hand, it breeds discontent, disparity and destitution among the masses, which lead to violence in some instances.

Basically, we consume to survive. Next we consume for comfort and then ambition. Acquiring for immediate needs is common in the animal world. Saving some for tomorrow is also an innate part of the survival instinct. But hoarding for fanciful and extravagant future requirements is greed not need. To increase needs exclusively for ambitions is covetousness (PARIGRAH).

Modern economic theories, ironically, deem consumerism as an index of development. The more a country consumes, the more developed and civilized it is considered. This has turned the benign terms consume and consumer into the global devil of consumerism. The communications revolution has added fuel to the fire. Some activists are making a serious effort to tackle these problems. However, in many instances, instead of dealing with the root causes of the problem, they are treating the

symptoms. Thus their efforts are misdirected and so they are adding fuel to the fire.¹

The Jain Approach:

The Jain approach to deal with the various problems of mankind is based upon our belief in equanimity (SAMATA). Jains believe that all living beings are equal and their function is to help each other with minimum interference. Our conduct should be such that all living beings are protected and there should be minimal impact on the environment that we share with each other. Obviously, this entails provident and prudent consumption. This is the concept of non-possessiveness or non-covetousness.

The code of conduct for Jain householders consists of five minor vows (ANUVRATS), and seven supplementary vows.² These vows along with their transgressions represent a system designed for sustainable interaction with other living beings and our environment. In order of their spiritual value, the five vows are: nonviolence (AHIMSA), truth (SATYA), non-stealing (ASTEYA), celibacy (BRAHMACHARYA) and non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH). Laymen observe these vows partially and so they are called the minor VOWS.

In terms of actual practice, the order of the five vows should be reversed with the vow of non-possessiveness being the most important. This vow is extremely important for the practice of celibacy, non-stealing, truthfulness and nonviolence. Without practicing non-possessiveness none of the other vows can be practiced adequately, that is, without any transgressions.

The literal meanings of the word 'PARIGRAH' (possessiveness) are to surround, to hold on both sides, embrace, enfold, envelope, seize, clutch, grasp, catch, take possession of, etc. Thus PARIGRAH implies material possessions. However, in the Jain scriptures, the definition of PARIGRAH is more profound. In TATTVAARTH SUTRA, Acharya Umaswati defines PARIGRAH

¹ Please see the quotation from an article by Ravi Chellam, reproduced at the end of this article.

² Please see 'Studies In Jainism: Reader 2' for details of the five vows (chapter 13) and seven supplementary vows and their transgressions (chapters 25 and 29).

as affectionate regard or infatuation (MOORCHCHHA).³ This includes the full range of feelings from liking to craving. Thus possessiveness (PARIGRAH) does not involve mere possession of money and material but the thoughts and feelings that are associated with them. Evidently, it is not possible for a layman to fully embrace the concept of non-possessiveness by renouncing all possessions. Jain monks who renounce all worldly possessions follow non-possessiveness to the full extent as part of their major vows (MAHAVRATS). Laymen try to follow it to varying degrees.

The seven supplementary vows, which support and facilitate the observance of the five minor vows, include periodic limits on the field of activity (DESHA AVAKAASHIK), practice of equanimity (SAAMAAYIK), partial or total fast (PROSHADHOPAVAAS), service to the virtuous (VAIYA AVRITYA), limiting the field of activity (DIGVRAT), limiting needless activities (ANARTHADANDAVRAT), limiting direct and indirect delectations (BHOGOPABHOGAPARIMAANAVRAT). Evidently, these supplementary vows sustain non-possessiveness. They essentially teach us to conserve natural resources and thus help us to reduce violence in our lives at a personal level. They also send a very strong message for the preservation of our environment.⁴

Non-possessiveness - The Key To Genuine Peace Of Mind

The primary goal of man is to lead a healthy and happy life. Many individuals relate happiness to material possessions and think that possessing things such as a big house, expensive cars and fancy clothes leads to happiness. But this is just a mirage. In reality, contentment and non-possessiveness bring genuine happiness and peace of mind. A mad pursuit of money and materials results in disquietude and worries. Most rich individuals appear to have little time to enjoy what they possess. Furthermore, they have a deep concern for maintaining their lifestyles.

One may argue: It is my hard earned money and I can do what I like. Why does it bother you? However, one should understand that the

³ MOORCHCHHA PARIGRAHAH | 7-17 |

⁴ It is seen that our Jain institutions, including temples and monks, indulge in various wasteful charades in the name of religion. They should take the lead in minimizing materialism and in conserving natural resources. - D. C. J.

resources of this planet belong to all inhabitants, humans as well as other living beings. Therefore every individual should consume only what is essential to satisfy his/her needs so that others are not deprived of their fair share. Remember that with freedom comes responsibility toward society.

Limiting our desires and possessions serves the cause of ecological balance. It is sacrifice - an act of charity. When desires and ambitions are consciously limited through our practice of non-possessiveness, contentment prevails. We have good thoughts and develop a sense of accomplishment. Our competitors do not remain our adversaries. They become our beneficiaries. Instead of prosperity for the few, well being of all is attained. It implies that non-possessiveness does not entail poverty. It is for the common good of the society. This process results in an atmosphere of goodwill, amity and peace in society.

Non-possessiveness And The Protection of The Environment

Indiscreet consumerism by individuals and nations involves rampant exploitation of natural resources resulting in pollution of the environment all over the globe. This behavior has aggravated the suffering of the common people. Efforts to resolve these problems through political maneuvering and/or tenets of modern economics have not been effective. Mahatma Gandhi understood these facts, as is evident from the following quotation:⁵

“To the beneficiaries of industrial growth, Gandhi’s views must seem utterly out of step with reality. But ... the industrialized world’s understanding of Gandhi is severely hampered by an inability – both moral and cultural – to identify with the human tragedies and privations in which Gandhi immersed himself.” Evidently, the virtue of non-possessiveness is the answer to the environmental crisis.

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⁵ Introduction to Part III of the book ‘Gandhi’s Significance for Today’, edited by John Hick and Lamont C. Hempel, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1989, page 187.

Environmental challenges Unsustainable model

Like many other countries, India has also unquestioningly embraced an economic growth model based on increasing consumption, which is neither sustainable from the environmental perspective nor inclusive in ensuring that the economic benefits are shared equitably. To prevent further degradation of the environment and to enable more informed and participatory environmental management, which can then be held accountable, we need a paradigm shift in our approach. We need to adopt a more holistic model of development, which includes environmental and social factors right from the beginning and is based on a robust ethical framework. To separate development, environment and social justice or to present these as conflicting issues is incorrect. Unless this fundamental shift takes place, all our attempts to protect and conserve the environment are bound to fail in the long run.

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Some Quotes

"Climate change will burn Africa."

"Insanely high pollution levels are resulting in a higher number of children suffering from respiratory disorders. The next generation is in grave danger."

"The (Chesapeake) bay today has become the ecological equivalent of a morbidly obese person, force-fed nitrogen and phosphorous."

"Global warming threatens the very survival of the planet..."

"Cities are eating up the planet."