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Aparigraha: Ecological Stewardship in Jain Ethics

Aparigraha: idea ekologicznej troski w etyce dżinijskiej

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Abstract

The present study aims to connect the Jain concept of *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness) with the current ecological challenges. By analyzing the interconnectedness of *aparigraha* with ecological stewardship, this research demonstrates how this Jain ethical principle can promote sustainable practices, reduce human impact on the environment, and foster harmonious coexistence with all forms of life. Furthermore, the paper examines the relationship of Jain cosmology, its emphasis on interdependence, and the principle of *aparigraha* in addressing modern environmental concerns. The required data are collected through reviewing the relevant literature and which were then analyzed thematically. Based on the qualitative research approach, the philosophical analysis of this article clearly points out the transformative potential of *aparigraha* as a guiding principle for achieving sustainability and reshaping humanity's relationship with nature. In doing so, this paper enriches the discussion of religion and ecological issues and helps policymakers to connect eco-religious insights with the ongoing efforts of mitigation and adaptation in reducing environmental issues.

Keywords

Aparigraha (non-possessiveness), interconnectedness, consumerism, environmental degradation, anthropocentrism, biocentrism, SDG 12

Streszczenie

Niniejsze opracowanie ma na celu powiązanie dżinijskiej koncepcji *aparigrahy* (nieposiadania) ze współczesnymi wyzwaniami ekologicznymi. Poprzez analizę zbieżności pomiędzy zasadami *aparigrahy*, a ideą ekologicznej troski, badanie to ukazuje, w jaki sposób dżinijski imperatyw

etyczny może sprzyjać praktykowaniu zasad zrównoważonego rozwoju, ograniczać ludzką ingerencję w środowisko oraz wspierać harmonijne współistnienie wszystkich form życia. Ponadto artykuł podejmuje refleksję nad relacją między kosmologią dżinizmu, jej naciskiem na współzależność a zasadą *aparigrahy* w kontekście współczesnych problemów środowiskowych. Dane zebrano poprzez przegląd literatury, którą następnie poddano analizie tematycznej. Analiza filozoficzna przeprowadzona w oparciu o jakościowe podejście badawcze wyraźnie wskazuje na przekształcający potencjał *aparigrahy* jako zasady przewodniej w dążeniu do osiągnięcia celów zrównoważonego rozwoju i kształtowania na nowo relacji człowieka z naturą. W ten sposób opracowanie poszerza dyskusję na temat religii i ekologii oraz pomaga decydentom lepiej łączyć idee wywodzące się z tradycji religijnych z działaniami na rzecz ograniczania i łagodzenia problemów środowiskowych.

Słowa kluczowe

aparigraha (nieposiadanie), współzależność, konsumpcjonizm, degradacja środowiska, antropocentryzm, biocentryzm, Cel Zrównoważonego Rozwoju 12

Introduction

The very fabric of life on earth is being threatened by the critical levels of global environmental crisis such as climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss and pollution. These environmental crises are the outcome of our behaviour and cultural practices regarding the environment and its management (Sayem 2023: 16, 32, 66; 2019; 2021a; 2020: 24). Environmental destruction is considered the result of the industrial revolution in the West (probably 1760-1850 CE) according to which the environment is solely for human use (Ibid.; Sayem 2021b:154). Anthropocentrism, which is radical humanism in other words, has been the core concentration from the time of European renaissance humanism (Sayem 2021b:154; 2025: 1) and it is only the present day that ethics has formally started to define the rights of animals, plants and other visible and invisible organisms (biocentrism). The natural world has a limited capacity to cooperate with rapid changes and can hardly absorb impacts. The pursuit of a meaningful and sustainable way of life has been a perennial quest of humanity, especially in the face of the ever-expanding consumerist culture and its profound impact on the environment and society (Kurenlahti 2018).

Almost every single religion teaches that we should consider ourselves as the trustees of nature rather than its masters (Sayem 2018; 2019). For the sake of sustaining our own lives, we must make use of natural resources, but we should neither possess them in a proprietary sense nor exploit them. Moreover, as stewards or trustees, we should act more as guardians than as masters. Traditional ethical systems and philosophies may offer valuable insights into contemporary problems. Increasingly, in today's world, the greatest challenge facing humanity

is to determine the position in which we wish to live and to continue living within the limitations imposed by the processes of nature.

As an ancient Indian religion and philosophy, Jainism provides a rich ethical framework for ecological stewardship, particularly through its principle of *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness or non-attachment). *Aparigraha*'s emphasis on minimalism, non-violence, and the reduction of material accumulation which has the potential to inspire sustainable living practices in the modern era, embracing *aparigraha* can bring remarkable benefits for both individual well-being and environmental conservation. By practicing minimalism and non-attachment to material possessions, we can foster contentment, inner peace, and reduced emotional turmoil (Jain 2023). This research aims to explore how Jain ethics, specifically *aparigraha*, can contribute to ecological stewardship and offer a philosophical foundation for addressing the environmental crisis of the modern era. This research paper will also focus on the area of ethical and moral dimensions towards environmental stewardship through an analysis of Jain eco-religious ethics *aparigraha*.

1. Study Background

Jainism provides a holistic ethical framework, with emphasis on non-violence (*ahimsa*), truth (*satya*), and non-possessiveness (*aparigraha*), which has influenced both individual and societal behaviours for over two millennia. *Aparigraha* gives importance to non-attachment to material possessions, not just for spiritual growth but also to reduce the ecological footprint. These teachings stand in stark contrast to the dominant paradigms of development and economic growth in a world vehemently driven by consumerism and resource exploitation.

Alternative approaches to sustainable living are being sought from various traditions and philosophies, as environmental issues become more pressing. Jain ethics, with emphasis on harmony with nature and responsible stewardship of the environment, offers a convincing perspective. Living with minimal possessions and truthfully acknowledging the transient nature of material things fosters a life of honesty and contentment, reducing the desire to accumulate more than necessary (Chapple 2006).

Major current environmental philosophies manifest substantial merging with *aparigraha*, offering both practical orientation and conceptual depth. Not only does Arne Naess's Deep Ecology parallel *aparigraha* in its emphasis on simplicity and restraint, but Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic likewise envisions humans as stewards of the biotic community rather than its masters. Social Ecology's challenge to systems and structures that deny rights to these

at the bottom, along with Ecofeminism's critiques on the oppression and exploitation of nature, align with *aparigraha*'s rejection of material accumulation and possessiveness. Biocentric perspectives advanced by Holmes Rolston III and Paul Taylor correspond to the interconnectedness and intrinsic value of life recognized by *aparigraha*. In this way, by integrating a spiritual-ethical framework of non-possession with diverse traditions of ecological thought *aparigraha* enriches contemporary environmental philosophy.

However, Jainism's potential to address contemporary ecological crises through an insight on *aparigraha* has not been fully explored in academic discourse. This research offers to fill this gap by analysing how *aparigraha* can guide ecological stewardship in the face of modern environmental challenges.

2. Literature Review

Tine Vekemans (2014) examines the intersection of ecology and religion, concentrating on Jainism. Vekemans' article asserts that Jain religious tradition can master ecological behaviours and ethics. For Vekemans, the biocentric worldview of Jainism, founded on interconnected souls (*jiva*), non-violence (*ahimsa*) and (deeds) *karma*, aligns with deep ecology principles. Preeti Rani Jain (2023) explores the Jain principle of *aparigraha* (non-possession) and its connection to minimalism and modern sustainability. Her article illustrates the association of *aparigraha* with environmental conservation and coeval movements like minimalism, underlining considerate consumption. Swati Ranbhor-Munot (2023) examines Jainism's profound ecological consciousness. Ranbhor-Munot's article demonstrates the interconnectedness of all life forms and the significance of symbiosis in nature. Vikram Singh (2015) illustrates Jainism's core-rooted ecological consciousness and its impact on environmental preservation. Singh's study attempts to consider Jain *aparigraha* as a profound ethical framework for ecological conservation. Trilok Kumar Jain (2024) gives a conceptual investigation of sustainability through the mirror of Jain philosophy. Kumar Jain's research presents the concept of *aparigraha* (non-accumulation) as a counterpoise to modern wealth-driven lifestyles, promoting considerate consumption and respect for ecological limits. Pankaj Sukanraj Jain (2023) explores the ethical foundation of Jainism and their connection to environmental sustainability. Sukanraj related the historical influence of Jainism with the present global impact. Andrew Brennan (2024) demonstrates a strong historical overview of the emergence of environmental philosophy in the late 1960s largely centred on Western thinkers and debates with limited engagement with non-Western traditions such as Jainism.

Though there are a lot of academic works on *ahimsa* (non-violence), a core tenet of religious teachings of most of the Indian origin religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, the ethical teachings of non-attachment or non-possessiveness precisely addressed as *aparigraha* had not been studied with importance. This paper will attempt to explore this unexplored area of Jain ethics from an ecological stewardship perspective.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research approach, which allows for a comprehensive understanding of the underlying principles of Jain ethics, particularly in terms of how they shape ethical behaviour toward the environment. The focus on ethical teachings of Jainism, particularly *aparigraha*, necessitates an approach that enables an in-depth exploration of the values, beliefs, and practices of its followers, as well as the ways in which these principles can be applied in the modern context of ecological crises.

Data collection for this study involves both primary and secondary sources, ensuring a well-rounded understanding of Jain ethics and ecological stewardship. Primary data are collected through direct engagement with Jain religious texts, focusing on their approach to non-possessiveness and ecological sustainability. Jain texts such as the *Agamas*, *Tattvartha Sutra*, and commentaries by renowned Jain philosophers are examined for their teachings on *aparigraha*. These texts provide a foundational understanding of Jain ethical principles and their connection to the source materials on Jainism's stance on non-possessiveness. Secondary data include previously published research, books, articles, and reports on Jain ethics, *aparigraha*, and environmental issues. The secondary data serve as a basis for understanding the academic discourse surrounding Jainism's ethical teachings and their potential to address environmental challenges. The sources of secondary data include journal articles, books, and conference papers that analyse the implications of Jain ethics for contemporary issues, especially in terms of sustainability and ecological balance. Data analysis in this research focuses on interpreting both thematic and comparative analysis.

The core approach to data analysis in this research is thematic analysis, which involves identifying and analysing recurring patterns or themes across the collected data. Thematic analysis is particularly useful for understanding how the concept of *aparigraha* manifests in Jain ethical teachings and how it can be linked to environmental sustainability. The key themes related to *aparigraha* and its role in ecological stewardship while illustrating how Jain ethics can contribute to sustainable living will be explored by the thematic analysis. The core themes

of this research paper are based on minimalism, interdependence, material detachment, monasticism, policy implications and affiliation with modern ethical philosophies.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. *Aparigraha* as a Philosophical Foundation of Virtuous Life

The Sanskrit words “*a*” (non) and “*parigraha*” (possession or attachment) are the etymology of *aparigraha* (Reading 2019). *Aparigraha*, rooted in the teachings of *Mahavira*, the 24th *Tirthankara*, urges individuals to minimize their excessive material desires and to live a life detached from earthly possessions. The term *aparigraha* refers to the practice of omitting material and sentimental attachments to nurture spiritual sanctity. *Aparigraha* encompasses not only material non-possession but also emotional and psychological detachment. Moreover, *aparigraha* is essential for freeing the soul from *karmic* bondage and worldliness. Only by minimizing worldly desires and attachments can one enable the soul to move closer to liberation, or *moksha*. Contentment, generosity, and humility are the noble virtues cultivated by practicing *aparigraha*. Greed, regarded as a pivotal cause of violence and exploitation, is strongly discouraged by this principle.

According to *aparigraha*, people should avoid becoming overly attached to material possessions, as this approach leads them toward simple living. In line with sustainability principles, *aparigraha* supports both waste reduction, conscious purchasing, and circular economic systems. The practice supports eco-friendly behaviours by helping individuals reduce their carbon footprint, conserve energy and consistently respect the limits of nature's resources. The central ecological significance of *aparigraha* rests in the fact that possessing fewer material goods can markedly reduce the ecologically damaging footprint one leaves on the world (Reading 2019).

4.2. *Aparigraha* as a Promoter of Ethical Lifestyle

Consumerism and relentless pursuit of material wealth are the prominent features of the modern world, therefore, *aparigraha* can offer an antidote to the exploitation of natural resources. It encourages detachment from excessive possessions and promotes a more sustainable lifestyle, one that consciously avoids the overconsumption of the earth's finite resources. As one of the seminal Jain scriptures states, “Renunciation is the giving up of external and internal possessions” (Tattvarta Sutra).

An ethical lifestyle that benefits both the individual and society is fostered by *aparigraha*. In modern societies, material possession and overconsumption, which are considered a barrier to obtaining liberation, are addressed directly through this principle. *Aparigraha* advocates sustainable living grounded in minimalism, while promoting a balanced relationship with the natural world and reducing ecological harm. Contemporary concerns about environmental degradation and resource exploitation aligns closely with the Jain principle of non-possessiveness (*aparigraha*). Improper attachment to material wealth and worldly relationships often leads to dissatisfaction, stress and anxiety. Encouragement toward detachment while cultivating inner peace and mental clarity is the core aspect of *aparigraha*. The principle urges individuals to concentrate on inner norms and values rather than earthly possessions or external acquisitions.

4.3. *Aparigraha* as a Biocentric Approach

From a deep-ecology point of view the most important contribution of Jainism is that it promotes a biocentric worldview. It does so through its cosmology of interconnected *jiva*, all ontologically equal souls in the grips of *karma* and rebirth (Vekemans 2014). *Aparigraha*, which is a universally applicable principle, transcends religious and spiritual boundaries. Buddhism, Stoicism and even modern minimalism, are the philosophies with which *aparigraha* resonates while emphasizing on achieving self-mastery and contentment by the reduction of material desires and possession.

4.4. *Aparigraha* as a Minimalist Approach to the Environment

A minimalist approach is promoted by this principle where individuals seek to consume only what is needed. *Aparigraha* extends beyond personal behaviour to communal responsibility regarding environmental implications. Inspired by this ethical principle, individuals can be encouraged to reduce their carbon footprints and mitigate ecological catastrophe by refraining from improper consumption and possessiveness. Among the ancient Indian traditions that emphasize non-violence and deep ecological wisdom, Jainism most explicitly enjoins its followers to perform *aparigraha* in order to cultivate an inner spirit of ecological equilibrium. (Bhatt 2021; Chapple 2006).

A mindset of recognizing the interconnectedness of all living forms is rendered by the practice of non-possessiveness. *Aparigraha* promotes ethical farming, sustainable agriculture and conservation efforts. In this way, a Jain can contribute to a more balanced cooperative relationship with the natural world. Modern capitalist ideologies that equate happiness with

material possession or wealth are challenged by *aparigraha*. A relevant teaching is found in a Jain scripture, “As a tree does not hold on to the fruits it bears, so should the wise not hold on to possessions” (Uttaradhyayana Sutra), which reflects the profound values of life such as spiritual contentment. From this ethical standpoint, societies are encouraged to rethink economic systems that prioritize unchecked growth and exploitative practices.

4.5. Aparigraha as an Ethical Pole Star for Ecological Action

Jain philosophy upholds *aparigraha* as its ethical foundation, encouraging reduction of possessive attachment through non-possession – an approach that aligns with simplicity-based and restrained lifestyles. *Aparigraha* is consistent with the principles of sustainable living and environmental stewardship. By embracing this principle, individuals are encouraged to conscious choices that minimize waste and resource consumption, thereby contributing to the preservation of the planet’s ecological balance (Tobias 2012). As a core ethical value, *aparigraha* promotes minimalist living by reducing all forms of acquisitiveness, including not only accumulation of physical goods and wealth but also excessive emotional attachment. Through this principle, individuals can learn to live without destructive impacts on natural resources or eco-systems and can develop sustainable practices.

Aparigraha exerts its most powerful ecological influence through the practice of simple living and moderation. It serves as a remedy against widespread consumerism and wasteful behaviours characteristic of modern society. By advocating detachment, Jainism indirectly challenges contemporary lifestyles that equate greater possessions with greater happiness. Through the practice of *aparigraha*, Jainism emphasises the profound interconnectedness of all forms of life. This recognition of interdependence fosters deep respect for the environment and all living organisms. Because Jainism views every form of life as sacred, any damage inflicted on creatures through overpopulation or environmental degradation stands contrary to its moral principles.

This ethical framework promotes ecological mindfulness, encouraging individuals to reduce waste, conserve energy, and protect biodiversity. The Jain principle of *aparigraha* aligns closely with modern efforts toward environmental sustainability. Jainism emphasises a holistic and simple that is consistent with the preservation of the natural environment.

Through *aparigraha* philosophy, Jainism offers a powerful ecological principle of action which focuses on an inner spirit of non-attachment combined with a profound respect for life. This philosophical spirit urges people and social groups to minimize their

environmental impact by adopting a lifestyle that harmonises with the natural environment. The urgency of environmental crises in our world can be met by *aparigraha* as an ethical guiding principle which shows the way to sustainable practices and environmental justice. The ethical implications of *aparigraha* extend beyond personal choices, encompassing broader societal and environmental considerations (Sangave 2001).

4.6. Aparigraha in Action: Sustainable Communities and Practices

A central role of Jainism is played by the principle of *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness), suggesting adherents to lead a life with minimal attachment to material possessions. Rooted in the concept of *aparigraha*, Jain communities have broader exemplary practices contributing to their reputation as advocates of ecological conservation and harmonious living with nature. Jain's approach to agriculture is one of the most striking examples of its commitment to sustainability and ecological balance. They prioritize sustainable and organic farming practices, minimizing the impact on the natural world. For example, by avoiding the use of chemical pesticides and herbicides on their farmland, many Jain farmers have returned to the ethical and natural methods of cultivation. They focus on the long-term well-being of the earth rather than short-term profit by dedicatedly preserving soil nutrients and reducing environmental degradation, which reflects the principle of *aparigraha* or non-possessiveness.

Jain temples and communities often embody sustainability and ecological conservation in their architecture by incorporating principles of eco-conscious design, using local materials and maximizing natural resources such as air and sunlight. For instance, the Jain community in Rajasthan has constructed several eco-friendly temples and institutions that integrate rainwater harvesting, energy-efficient systems and waste management techniques.

In addition, adherence to vegetarianism is a fundamental aspect of Jain ethical beliefs. Vegetarianism is both a spiritual practice and a sustainable lifestyle choice, reducing environmental impact through its emphasis on plant-based consumption. Influenced by the principle of *aparigraha*, Jains avoid overconsumption, practise mindful eating, and emphasise moderation in all aspects of life.

Many Jain families live in modest homes and choose to limit their possessions by owning only the necessary belongings, which promotes not only spiritual growth as detachment from material goods, but also environmental sustainability. By reducing their ecological footprint, Jain communities demonstrate that sustainable living is deeply aligned with spiritual values, embodying non-possessiveness in their daily lives.

4.7. *Aparigraha* in Present Environmental Movements

The principle of *aparigraha* is manifested in modern environmental activism through movements promoting sustainable living, zero waste and minimalism. A clear alignment is seen between many environmental groups, individuals advocating for sustainable living and *aparigraha*, which encourages adoption of simpler lifestyles and reduction of unnecessary consumption. For instance, the zero-waste movement urges people to reduce their reliance on single-use plastics and other disposable items which aligns with the *aparigraha*-based rejection of excessive accumulation of goods that harms the planet and with practices aimed at reducing the environmental impact of human activities. Sustainable farming methods, ethical sourcing of goods, and the embrace of a circular economy, where materials are reused and recycled rather than discarded, are all activities that reduce ecological footprints.

In urban environments, the growing popularity of minimalism further demonstrates the relevance of *aparigraha* in today's world, as people become increasingly aware of the environmental cost of their impractical overconsumption and the ecological burden of waste. Inspired by the principles of *aparigraha*, minimalists opt for fewer possessions and focus on quality over quantity to reduce waste production and carbon footprint. Similarly, many environmental activists promote eco-friendly clothing options supporting brands that prioritize sustainability over profit, adopting practices that reduce harm to ecosystems and animals. Individuals adopting non-possessiveness contribute to a more equitable distribution of resources and help ensure that future generations inherit a world not ravaged by overconsumption and waste. Many Jains in the United States, aware of the peril to the well-being of animals caused by factory farming, have eschewed dairy products that otherwise would be consumed in more cow-friendly India (Chapple 2006).

Aparigraha manifests in several practical ways in rural settings, where communities are often tied to agriculture and farmers tend to be conscious of their natural environment and limitations of available resources. Many Jains living in rural India practice simple living, reducing their material needs to what is necessary for survival. Their commitment to the principles of sustainable farming, such as organic cultivation and minimizing harm to ecosystems and earth, is clearly visible. Moreover, in rural areas, water resources are often managed collectively with the goal of using what is necessary for sustenance rather than for excess.

As a timeless Jain ethical principle, *aparigraha* adapts to both urban and rural settings in a unique way, fostering sustainability, simplicity and collective resource management within

the rural framework while encouraging ethical consumption, minimalism and mindful living in the urban framework.

4.8. Limitations and Challenges of Applying Jain Ethics

Materialism and consumerism dominate nearly all aspects of life in the modern world, emphasising the relentless pursuit of wealth, status and possessions, an ethos that conflicts with the Jain teachings of non-attachment and reduction of one's possession. Adherence to *aparigraha* can pose a challenge for individuals living in fast-paced competitive societies because aspirations for career advancements, material wealth and social status are deeply embedded in cultures of the contemporary world, making it difficult to embrace the principle of non-possessiveness.

Living according to *aparigraha* may also be seen as impractical, or even counterproductive, in societies where success is measured primarily by the accumulation of wealth and resources. Striking a balance between personal ambitions and ethical constraints imposed by Jain teachings is another challenge. For instance, the pursuit of higher education, career development, and professional success, may require accumulation of material resources, which stands in opposition to the spirit of *aparigraha*.

Family dynamics can also pose obstacles to living in accordance with *aparigraha*. Conflicts may arise when expectations of financial inheritance, support, and provision of material goods intersect with the commitment to Jain ethical principles. The desire for possessions is amplified by constant exposure to social media, advertisements and the availability of online shopping. Societal pressures to keep up with global trends and consumer practices may be faced by people due to the interconnectedness of the world, which can contradict the ethos of *aparigraha*.

Conclusion

A remarkable philosophical framework for addressing modern ecological crises is offered by the Jain ethical principle of *aparigraha*, or non-possessiveness. This principle encourages individuals to relinquish attachment to material possessions and to adopt a lifestyle centred on sustainability, simplicity and reverence for all forms of life, whether visible or non-visible. This ethical principle undoubtedly embodies ecological stewardship by providing a crystal-clear ethical roadmap for maintaining the inevitable relationship between humans and nature. *Aparigraha* offers a practical and timely solution to the challenges of resource depletion,

overconsumption and environmental degradation, thus it is difficult to overstate the relevance of *aparigraha* in contemporary environmental ethics. The potential contribution of this Jain ethical principle to global sustainability efforts has been well illustrated in this research paper. By connecting the Jain ethical principle of *aparigraha* and the affiliated notion of ecological stewardship with the present unprecedented ecological crisis, the paper attempted to explore an indigenous, community-based and durable solution to contemporary ecological problems. Moreover, this study has contributed to a more inclusive and diverse ethical framework for environmental action by broadening the scope of environmental ethics to include a Jain eco-philosophy. Eventually, in the context of ecological stewardship, the implementation of Jain ethical principles has the potential to transform both global systems and individual behaviours. This paper suggests a paradigm shift from exploitation to empathy, cultivating contentment and harmony with nature. The wisdom embedded in Jainism offers a powerful ethical tool to guide humanity toward a more sustainable and secure future.

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