Jainism Says: Climate Crisis Series - What is Climate Crisis? (Part 2 of 3)

This is the second in a series of 3 questions and answers about climate change. Part 1 explained climate change and how various human activities are causing it. This article below examines why we, as Jains, should care about climate change. The final article will address what actions we can take to limit the adverse effects of climate change.

Question: Why should we, especially as Jains, care about the climate/environmental issues? Why does climate matter? Why should anyone care?

From a purely anthropomorphic (human-centric) point of view, taking action on climate change is necessary for our own survival and well-being. To date, climate change has affected poorer parts of the world and animal and plant life more than people in the developing world. The wealthier countries and communities have been mostly spared from the most serious effects, so far. However, climate change does not favor or discriminate. Left unaddressed, it will affect every living being, if not in our lifetimes, then in the coming generations. In the history of mankind, people have generally escaped from disasters by migrating to new lands. However, the unprecedented nature of climate change is that it engulfs the entire planet, leaving no feasible place for people to escape to. Therefore, even from a purely selfish standpoint, one should care for the sake of his or her own comfort and survival.

From a broader moral standpoint, we share the Earth with billions of other humans as well as other life, all of whom desire to live, seek happiness, and avoid pain. A naturally functioning planet is a basic requirement for every living being to survive. The choices we make today will affect the amount of greenhouse gases we put into the atmosphere in the future. The basic moral argument is that humans have inherited the resources and boons of a good life from generations before, and we owe it to the younger and coming generations, and for all other life, to leave them a livable planet.

What is the Jain point of view on why climate change should matter?

From a Jain perspective, let’s first recognize that Jain dharma offers a treasure of wisdom to help humankind navigate the uniquely global, modern-day challenges posed by climate change. Jain dharma offers extremely relevant and timely guidance not only for Jains but for all humanity and all living beings. Jains strive to follow five key principles known as Mahavr̥t̥s (great vows). Two of these Jain principles are most directly relevant to climate change, including Ahimsa (non-violence) and Aparigraha (non-possessiveness). Another two principles also have relevance for climate change, including Asteya (non-stealing), and Satya (truthfulness). Let’s examine each of these.

- **Ahimsa**: Our first and foremost basis for life is reflected in the Jain principle “ahimsa paramo dharma” (non-violence is the highest virtue). This “live and let live” principle of non-violence and compassion extends to all living beings, and to the planet itself as an ecosystem of living beings. Jain dharma recognizes the connectedness of all living beings. Parasaropagrahā Jīvānām is a Jain aphorism from the Tattvārtha Sūtra, which translates as “all life is bound together by mutual support and
interdependence”, or more literally as “souls render service to one another.” Ahimsa calls for mutual respect and reverence for all living beings. When Ahimsa is practiced to its full extent, humanity can live with compassion in more balanced harmony with the environment and the other living beings on the planet.

- **Aparigraha**: In Jain dharma, the word parigraha means to crave, seek, or collect material possessions. The Jain Mahavrat of Aparigraha calls for non-attachment or non-possessiveness. Attachment is considered an obstacle to spiritual liberation because the excessive pursuit of material possessions leads to the desire to own such objects, insatiable greed for acquiring more, and the fear of losing what one has. All of these can become a distraction to the upliftment of the soul. For laypeople, Jain dharma recognizes the role of material possessions as merely a temporary means to sustain the body to the necessary degree during its finite physical life. It is believed that we are not the owner of wealth, but merely trustees who should use the wealth to help those in need instead of hoarding and spending lavishly on ourselves. Material possessions should not become the end-goal of life itself. When people form attachments to consumer goods, houses, cars, jewelry, vacations, luxuries, wealthy, and so on, then the underlying attachment not only becomes a distraction to our spiritual growth, but it also results in the exploitation of the environment, which is a major cause of climate change. For this reason, Jain dharma recommends that people should extinguish or minimize desires to only what is necessary and strive to limit one’s needs.

- **Asteya** is the Jain Mahavrat concerning the principle of not stealing. For laypersons, non-stealing is usually interpreted as not taking something that does not belong to us, and not to acquire possessions through unfair means. If we further consider the resources of our planet Earth as inherently shared by all living beings, then the principle of Asteya can be interpreted to mean that no one should take or keep more than his or her fair share. Today, global wealth is extremely concentrated in the hands of a small minority of people (including some Jains). Extreme wealth disparities can be considered a kind of theft because it can lead to desperation for survival and a race to the bottom for the many other have-nots. The resulting exploitation of resources has an adverse effect on climate change. To practice Asteya, we should be mindful to be content with our fair share of resources.

- **Satya** is the Jain Mahavrat concerning the principle of telling the truth. For laypersons, Satya means observance of truth in thought, speech, and action. In practice, this means to tell the truth, not to lie not to deceive, and not to speak things that cause pain and suffering to others. As it pertains to climate change, there are two aspects of Satya that are important. The first is to avoid deluding ourselves into denying the existence of climate change, our role in it, or our responsibility to address it. Such delusion would amount to lying to ourselves. The second aspect is to promote the truth of climate change. In a democratic world where the future of the planet will be decided by the collective beliefs and actions of many, it is imperative that people understand the facts. Today, there is much harmful misinformation in the world about climate change. To observe Satya, one must not only avoid propagating false beliefs, but also strive to create the right awareness with others in such matters.

The relevance of these Jain principles to climate change is very critical. Most humans do not naturally strive to commit violence to the environment. We do not intend to become greedy
and hoard. We do not take pride in stealing and lying. But let us consider whether we are applying Jain principles to their full extent to address climate change.

The reality is that most of us, whether Jain or not, remain oblivious to or in denial of the levels of violence that we cause either directly or more often, indirectly. The root cause of our ignorance is our disconnectedness. Governments and business institutions, acting under national and corporate interests, collectively enable hundreds of millions of humans to cooperate with each other to commit unimaginable levels of violence. However, because of the gigantic scale and complexity of such institutions, we individuals may not recognize or feel responsible for the violence enabled by our own actions, because of our disconnectedness. A person living by the principles of Ahimsa would never directly participate in wiping out an entire forest, starving the resident animals, displacing its indigenous people, and poisoning its environment. But the same individuals may not be aware that his/her taxes, consumer spending, and stock market investments may be enabling exactly such violence.

In modern society, we are disconnected from the natural world, from our actions and consequences, and even from each other. Our advanced technology, science, cultural institutions, and specialized economies allow us to distance ourselves almost entirely from the acquisition of the necessities of life. We live in urban and suburban areas, far from nature. Our food is grown far away in massive industrial farms and transported from long distances by people we never meet and environments we never interact with. Similarly, our water, electricity, fuel, clothes, medicines, and other necessities of life are provided through complex processes from which we are largely disconnected except as end-consumers. Even when we do connect with nature, it is often in the form of very limited experiences, venturing into safe spaces in the wilderness, or recreating in curated parks. Whereas our ancestors could navigate by the stars, we hardly know the cycles of the moon, and are dependent on the internet to know the temperature outdoors.

This is not to suggest we should return to living in forests like primates. Rather, let us recognize how our spiritual disconnectedness with ourselves and with the world is making us part of a much greater system of violence than is commonly recognized. A true commitment to stopping climate change using Ahimsa, Aparigraha, Asteya, and Satya requires individuals to create awareness and take responsibility for the effects of the entirety of our actions, individually and collectively, and directly and indirectly.

In summary, Jain dharma is a spiritual practice centered on compassion and non-violence to all living beings and the planet. In Jain dharma, all souls are considered equal, and humans are not entitled to impose superiority over other living beings or hold dominion over the planet. Our religion recognizes the interdependency of living beings for our mutual survival. Jain dharma has great relevance for understanding and addressing the contemporary challenge of climate change. As the spiritual adherents of Mahavir Bhagwan, we are well-positioned to share the message of Jain dharma with a world that needs to act decisively and with greater urgency to save the planet. This concludes our perspective on us, as human beings, and Jains especially should care about climate change. The next article will explain what we can do to stop climate change and protect the environment.