



Conference Paper

Water Wisdom: Jain Philosophy as A Path to Sustainable Management

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17990207>

Abstract

Water is one of the most essential and widely used natural resources by humankind, yet it remains one of the most undervalued assets today. This disregard has contributed to the ongoing global water crisis, with scarcity becoming a pressing issue in many regions. Addressing this crisis requires more than technological solutions—it demands a fundamental shift in human attitudes and behaviours toward water consumption. A potential approach can be derived from the ancient wisdom found in Jain literature, which underscores the recognition of water as a living entity and hence deserving of respect as a biotic component of nature. The Jain principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence) extends to the environment, advocating for minimal harm and mindful use of all natural resources, including water. Communities practising Jainism have implemented these values, demonstrating sustainable water management and conservation techniques that can serve as a model for broader societal adoption. By integrating such philosophies into modern water management strategies, it is possible to inspire socio-economic transformations that prioritise sustainability. This shift in mindset not only fosters responsible consumption but also contributes significantly to the achievement of global sustainable development goals. Thus, drawing from the Jain approach could provide a holistic and ethical framework for addressing today's water crisis and promoting long-term ecological balance.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 12-12-2024
- Accepted: 23-02-2025
- Published: 26-03-2025
- IJCRM:4(SP1); 2025:122-125
- ©2025, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Jain S, Mahla PK. Water Wisdom: Jain Philosophy as A Path to Sustainable Management. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2025;4(SP1):122-125.

Access this Article Online



www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: Jainism, Water education, Living organisms, Jain literature, Sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Water, as both a fundamental element of life and a dynamic force of nature, transcends its physical properties to embody complex ecological, cultural, and ethical dimensions. It is not merely a resource to be consumed but a living entity woven into the fabric of biological^[1] and spiritual systems^[2]. Water, while universally recognised as essential to life, is often treated as an inexhaustible resource, leading to its undervaluation in both economic and ecological terms. Globally, freshwater resources are under severe pressure, with over 2 billion people lacking access to safely managed drinking water services^[3]. Despite its critical role in sustaining ecosystems, agricultural productivity, and human health, water is frequently subjected to mismanagement, over-extraction, and pollution. Recent studies have emphasised that the commodification of water in global markets has further distanced its value from its ecological significance^[4]. The undervaluation of water is particularly concerning in light of climate change, where erratic rainfall patterns and rising global temperatures threaten to exacerbate water scarcity in vulnerable regions.

The escalating issue of water scarcity requires urgent and comprehensive action. Scientists and researchers have proposed several key solutions, including community education on water conservation and the establishment of centralised governance structures to manage water infrastructure and mitigate extreme events such as droughts and floods. In addition to governance reforms, technological solutions have been advocated, such as desalination, wastewater reclamation from domestic and industrial sources, and improvements in water catchment and harvesting techniques^[5].

But these solutions come with problems like energy-intensiveness, negative environmental externalities, policy concerns, and inaccessibility to small-scale farmers. Furthermore, these approaches alone cannot address the root causes of water mismanagement, which are deeply tied to human behaviours and cultural practices. For the effective resolution of the water scarcity issue, a fundamental shift in these human attitudes and behaviours is necessary, particularly focusing on fostering positive traits such as community involvement and proactive resource management, ensuring equitable access and long-term conservation^[6].

One such viable approach to tackling water scarcity can be drawn from ancient Indian knowledge, which has increasingly found relevance in various modern disciplines. Jainism, one of the world's oldest philosophies and religions, offers a unique perspective on environmental ethics, particularly in the realm of water education. Jain literature, in particular, offers valuable insights into the identity of water, its physical constituents and its use and management, hence presenting a perspective deeply rooted in ethics and sustainability. This paper aims to explore the water ethics embedded in Jain literary traditions and examine how these principles can inspire changes in the human approach to water and its conservation. By integrating Jain philosophical perspectives into modern water management

strategies, this research highlights the potential for socio-economic transformation, fostering long-term ecological balance and supporting global sustainable development efforts.

Jain literary view of water as a living entity

The modern scientific classification of water as an abiotic resource, devoid of life, is fundamentally at odds with the Jain conception of water resources. According to Jain philosophy, water is considered a living entity, as documented in various Jain scriptures, such as the *Gommatasara Jivakand*^[7] and *Tatvarthsutra*.^[8] These scriptures categorise the five elements, which are air, water, earth, fire and plants, as *sthavar jiva*, or one sensed life force. The Jain scriptures, written by ascetics at different times, unanimously describe water as a living entity that should be treated with reverence and conserved.

Jainism classifies reality into two fundamental categories: *jiva* (living) and *ajiva* (nonliving). Every *jiva* is believed to possess consciousness, energy, and bliss. Non-living entities encompass concepts like time, space, and the karmic matter (*dravya*) that binds to the *jiva*. The taxonomy in Jain philosophy ranks life forms in an ascending order, beginning with those that possess only the sense of touch, the most fundamental characteristic of life. This category, called *sthavar jiva*, includes earth, water, fire, air, and plants, all recognised as living entities due to their capacity to feel. All aspects of the natural world are imbued with sensation; the earth itself is capable of responding to human actions. Not only do animals exhibit cognitive faculties such as memory and emotion, but all surrounding entities—from the water we drink and the air we breathe to inanimate objects—are considered to sense our presence. The elements of nature interact with us through the sense of touch, which we often overlook, yet they play a crucial role in sustaining life^[9].

Jain philosophy emphasises the protection of all forms of life, regardless of their sensory capabilities. This includes the principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence) towards even one-sensed beings like water, driven by the belief in *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness) and *parasparopagraho jivanaam* (the interdependence of all living beings). It shows that all life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence. These principles highlight the ethical responsibility to protect the environment, encompassing both biotic and abiotic elements. A person who neglects or disregards the existence of earth, air, fire, water, and vegetation, disregards its own existence, which is entwined with them^[10].

The concept of *karma* also plays a significant role in guiding Jain environmental ethics. Misusing natural resources or harming living entities is considered an act of violence and theft, which accrues negative *karma*. This consciousness is reinforced in the *Kalachakra* (Time-Wheel), which illustrates the degradation of the natural environment and underscores the need for a pollution-free ecosystem, as highlighted by the teachings of the Tirthankaras.

Water holds a sacred status within Jain rituals. It is employed in *puja* (worship) as a symbol of purity and is used for the *abhishek* (ritual anointment) of the deity's idol. This practice reinforces the belief that water, as a sacred element, must be treated with the utmost respect. The chanting of holy mantras over water during rituals is believed to imbue the water with spiritual power, a concept that resonates with the notion of "water memory." This belief aligns with the idea that water can hold and transmit energy, emphasising its sanctity and role in maintaining both physical and spiritual well-being.

The concept of water memory is a controversial scientific hypothesis suggesting that water can "remember" substances that were once dissolved in it, even after those substances have been diluted to the point of no longer being physically detectable. It suggested that water molecules might somehow organise themselves in a way that preserves the "memory" of the substance they once contained. One of the most famous experiments on water memory was conducted by Masaru Emoto, a Japanese scientist who believed that human consciousness could influence the molecular structure of water [11]. Emoto's work claimed that positive or negative emotions directed at water samples could change the crystalline structure of ice formed from that water. Though the idea was seen with scepticism due to its limited scientific replicability, there is scope for future research on this concept.

Theoretically, the belief that water is alive aligns with the idea that it could carry imprints of life or even actions, which bears a philosophical similarity to the concept of water memory. Jain texts, like the *Bhaktamar Stotra*, emphasise the purity and spiritual significance of water, suggesting that it can carry and transmit spiritual energy in ritual practices. Although Jainism does not explicitly discuss water memory in scientific terms, its emphasis on water as a living, spiritually significant entity draws a conceptual parallel to the idea that water could retain the essence or "memory" of substances or experiences it interacts with and offers a unique philosophical dimension for further exploration of environmental ethics.

Jain Practices Regarding Water Conservation

This cosmological perspective creates ethical obligations for humans to treat water with the same respect afforded to sentient beings. Water harm, such as through pollution or waste, is equated with harm to life itself. The Jain community practises these principles in real-life contexts, both by ascetics and laypeople. Jain ascetics adhere strictly to minimising harm to all forms of life, including water. They have water only after straining it through a thick cloth, boiling it and consuming it within a specific time limit, ensuring minimal harm to the *jiva* present in water. Laypeople also strive to minimise harm, particularly during fasting, by filtering water before consumption.

Several Jain communities, especially in India, have demonstrated sustainable water management based on Jain principles. One notable example is the implementation of

rainwater harvesting systems, where communities collect and store rainwater for future use, especially in arid regions. This ancient practice is deeply connected to the Jain belief in minimising harm to natural resources and preserving them for future generations.

In Rajasthan, a region that faces severe water shortages, Jain communities have long practised rainwater harvesting [12]. Temple complexes, in particular, have elaborate systems to capture and store rainwater, which serves the needs of the temple as well as surrounding communities. This practice not only conserves water but also helps reduce reliance on groundwater, which is often over-extracted, leading to environmental degradation.

Contemporary Relevance for Sustainable Development

The Jain views and practices regarding water conservation carry substantial contemporary relevance in the context of sustainable development. Jain philosophy, which advocates for careful use of natural resources, offers a valuable framework for addressing the environmental challenges faced today. The principles of *ahimsa*, *aparigraha*, and *parasparopagraho jivanaam* stress the importance of reducing consumption, avoiding exploitation, and preserving ecological balance.

The Jain emphasis on the conservation of *panch tatva*—including water—also ties into socio-economic development, promoting a harmonious relationship between human activities and nature. Practices such as reducing resource use, avoiding wastage, and maintaining the purity of natural elements can contribute to environmental sustainability and resilience against climate change. These teachings, rooted in ancient wisdom, provide a pathway toward achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly related to clean water (SDG 6).

The ethical imperatives presented by Jainism go beyond mere environmental conservation; they also encompass a call for socio-economic equality. By advocating for non-violence and equitable treatment of all living beings, Jainism suggests an integrated approach to development—one that respects the intrinsic value of nature and aims to achieve peace and harmony for all. This philosophy offers a holistic route toward sustainable development, embodying a futuristic vision of coexistence and ecological balance [13].

CONCLUSION

In recognising all that surrounds us as imbued with life and deserving of reverence, Jainism presents an ethical framework that transcends anthropocentric limitations, decentralises moral considerations, and highlights the imperative of preserving life in its diverse elemental, vegetative, and animal manifestations, thereby urging humanity to adopt a more holistic and inclusive approach to environmental stewardship. The landmark ruling by the Uttarakhand High Court in *Mohammed Salim v. State of Uttarakhand* (2017), which granted legal personhood to the River Ganga [14], underscores a significant shift towards

acknowledging the sanctity and ecological importance of natural entities. It emphasises the urgent need to protect and maintain the natural world in its pristine state, mirroring Jainism's call for reverence toward all elements of nature. Although the stay on this ruling by the Supreme Court leaves its final status in uncertainty, it remains a profound testament to the evolving recognition of the rights of natural ecosystems. This legal recognition of the River Ganga reflects how religious traditions, like those found in Jainism, can influence judgments and lawmaking, thereby fostering a paradigm shift that values nature's intrinsic sanctity and emphasises our collective responsibility to protect all forms of life.

The challenges of applying these ancient principles on a global scale are evident, ranging from cultural and economic resistance to practical policy implementation hurdles. However, the opportunities presented by this approach are equally compelling. Jain communities have demonstrated that these ethics are not just theoretical but can lead to sustainable, practical water management practices that yield socio-economic benefits. By drawing from Jain water ethics, there is potential to inspire a shift in global mindsets—one that prioritises responsible consumption, equitable access, and the sustainable management of natural resources. While Jain philosophy offers solutions that may initially appear local or culturally specific, its underlying ethical imperatives have universal relevance in today's interconnected world, making it a valuable contribution to the broader discourse on water ethics and socio-economic transformation.

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