



Reclaiming Indigenous Wisdom: A Subaltern Critique of Buddhism and Jainism as Alternatives to Mainstream Ethical Frameworks

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Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world marked by environmental crises, social inequalities, and moral disillusionment, ethical frameworks based on material progress, individualism, and economic growth have proven inadequate in addressing these pressing challenges. Dominant ethical systems, both in the Western world and mainstream Indian thought, prioritize economic development and individual success, often neglecting the long-term consequences of these pursuits on the environment and social harmony. In contrast, indigenous philosophical systems, particularly those of Buddhism and Jainism, offer ethical teachings that prioritize non-violence (Ahimsa), interconnectedness, and mindful living—values that resonate with contemporary global concerns.

This paper explores how Buddhism and Jainism present compelling ethical alternatives, advocating for a holistic, sustainable, and ecologically balanced approach to life. By examining these traditions from a subaltern perspective, this paper argues that these indigenous systems offer powerful critiques of mainstream models and present solutions for a more just, peaceful, and ecologically harmonious future.

Mainstream Ethical Systems and Their Shortcomings

In modern societies, mainstream ethical frameworks often align with economic and individualistic values. Economic growth and material progress are prioritized over environmental and social well-being. This materialistic worldview, which permeates both Western and mainstream Indian ethical systems, leads to widespread environmental degradation, social inequalities, and moral fragmentation.

In the Western context, ethical frameworks like utilitarianism and capitalist individualism promote efficiency, competition, and the pursuit of personal wealth. These systems tend to neglect long-term consequences and the well-being of the collective, focusing instead on short-term gains. Similarly, in India, the emphasis on rapid economic development, industrialization, and individual success—especially since the liberalization of the 1990s—has often overshadowed traditional values of social harmony, ecological balance, and community welfare. In this context, it is crucial to explore alternative ethical frameworks that do not just advocate for economic or material growth but also take into account the social, environmental, and spiritual dimensions of life. This is where indigenous philosophies, such as Buddhism and Jainism, offer compelling alternatives.

Buddhism and Jainism: A Holistic Approach to Ethics

Buddhism and Jainism, two ancient Indian philosophical traditions, provide a profound and holistic approach to ethics that emphasizes compassion, non-violence (Ahimsa), and mindfulness. These traditions share common ethical principles, but each has its unique approach to fostering an ethical life rooted in the idea of interconnectedness. Both Buddhist and Jain teachings highlight the importance of living in harmony with not only human beings but with the entire environment, thereby offering a valuable alternative to the dominant materialistic ethical systems that prioritize individual success, consumption, and economic growth.

Buddhism: The Path to Enlightened Ethical Living

Buddhism is grounded in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, which together provide a framework for ethical living and personal transformation. At the core of Buddhism is the belief that suffering (dukkha) is inherent in human life, but through understanding and practice, it is possible to overcome suffering and attain liberation (nirvana). The ethical guidelines laid out in the Eightfold Path are designed to help individuals live harmoniously, reduce suffering, and cultivate a deeper awareness of the interconnectedness of all beings.

The Eightfold Path, a guide to right living, includes principles such as Right Action, Right Livelihood, and Right Mindfulness, which directly influence one's ethical behavior. Right Action emphasizes behaving in ways that do not harm others, encouraging practices such as honesty, respect, and kindness. Right Livelihood advocates for earning a living in a manner that does not exploit others or cause harm to the environment. This principle encourages individuals to seek occupations that promote social good, sustainability, and justice.

Perhaps the most significant ethical component of Buddhism is Right Mindfulness. Mindfulness is a mental state of awareness in which an individual remains present and attentive to the consequences of their actions, thoughts, and speech. In the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness is cultivated through meditation, allowing practitioners to recognize their interconnectedness with others and the world around them. By becoming more aware of their thoughts and behaviors, practitioners can break free from destructive patterns of desire, greed, and attachment that lead to harm and suffering.

Mindfulness, in the context of Buddhist ethics, goes beyond personal well-being. It extends to relationships with others and the environment, encouraging compassion and nonviolence towards all sentient beings. Compassion (Karuna) is a cornerstone of Buddhist ethics, driving individuals to act with empathy and care for others, whether human, animal, or even nature. By practicing mindfulness, Buddhists become more attuned to the suffering of others and develop a natural inclination to alleviate that suffering, thus promoting an ethical life rooted in interconnectedness.

Buddhism's ethical approach also challenges the materialistic and individualistic tendencies of contemporary societies. In Buddhism, the pursuit of material wealth and personal success is viewed as a source of suffering because it fosters attachment and desire. Instead, Buddhism encourages a life of moderation and simplicity, wherein material possessions are not seen as central to happiness. This emphasis on simplicity and spiritual growth over material accumulation offers a stark contrast to the mainstream ethical systems of consumerism and constant striving for personal gain.

Jainism: The Rigorous Ethics of Ahimsa

Jainism, another ancient Indian tradition, shares many ethical principles with Buddhism, but it places an even greater emphasis on the principle of Ahimsa (non-violence), making it a central tenet of the Jain worldview. In Jainism, Ahimsa is not merely a passive avoidance of harm but a rigorous and active commitment to avoid causing any form of harm—physically, mentally, or emotionally—to any living being, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant.

The Jain ethical code is uncompromising in its application of Ahimsa. Jains believe that every living entity, whether human, animal, insect, or plant, possesses a soul and therefore deserves respect and protection. This belief extends even to microscopic life forms, highlighting the extreme level of care and mindfulness that Jains practice in their daily lives. The commitment to non-violence in Jainism is so profound that it influences not only actions but also speech, thought, and diet.

One of the most well-known aspects of Jain ethical practice is its strict dietary guidelines. Most Jains follow a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle, refraining from consuming any food that involves harm to animals or insects. This is rooted in the belief that consuming food from sources that exploit or harm living beings creates negative karma and perpetuates the cycle of suffering (samsara). The Jain commitment to Ahimsa is also reflected in their practice of taking extreme precautions to avoid killing even the smallest life forms. For example, many Jains wear masks to avoid accidentally inhaling insects and sweep the ground in front of them to avoid stepping on ants or other small creatures.

Jain ethics also emphasize the importance of Aparigraha, the principle of non-possessiveness or non-attachment. Jains believe that attachment to material possessions and desires leads to violence, as it fosters greed and conflict. Aparigraha teaches the practice of detachment from worldly possessions and encourages an ascetic lifestyle, where one minimizes their impact on the world by reducing consumption and living simply.

While Jainism's commitment to non-violence is often seen as a strict ethical code, it is ultimately grounded in the belief in the interconnectedness of all life. By adhering to the principles of Ahimsa, Jains seek to purify their souls and reduce the accumulation of negative karma. In this way, Jainism not only offers an ethical framework for living in harmony with other beings but also provides a spiritual path to liberation (moksha) from the cycle of birth and death.

Ecological Harmony and Sustainable Living

Both Buddhism and Jainism place a strong emphasis on ecological harmony. In Buddhism, the concept of dependent origination teaches that all phenomena arise in dependence on other factors and are interconnected. This teaching underscores the idea that human beings cannot thrive in isolation from the environment or other living beings. By recognizing this interdependence, Buddhists are encouraged to adopt a lifestyle that minimizes harm to the environment and fosters a sense of responsibility toward the planet and its ecosystems.

Similarly, Jainism's commitment to non-violence extends to environmental concerns. Jains view the Earth as a living organism, and their ethical practices encourage a deep respect for nature. By practicing non-violence in their interactions with the environment, Jains promote sustainable living and ecological preservation. The Jain principle of Ahimsa calls for a radical shift away from the exploitative relationship that many societies have with nature, advocating for a lifestyle that prioritizes environmental conservation and respect for all forms of life.

In both traditions, ethical living goes hand in hand with spiritual growth. The emphasis on mindfulness, compassion, and non-violence leads to a deeper understanding of one's relationship with others and the Earth. By cultivating these virtues, practitioners are able to live more harmoniously with the world, reducing their ecological footprint and contributing to the preservation of the planet.

Conclusion

Buddhism and Jainism offer profound ethical frameworks that advocate for a holistic, sustainable, and compassionate approach to life. Both traditions emphasize non-violence (Ahimsa), interconnectedness, and mindfulness, providing valuable insights into how humans can live more harmoniously with others and with the environment. In a world dominated by materialism, consumerism, and individualism, the ethical teachings of Buddhism and Jainism offer a powerful critique of mainstream ethical systems, encouraging individuals to adopt simpler, more mindful lifestyles that prioritize the collective well-being and ecological sustainability. These traditions provide not only a moral guide for individual conduct but also a pathway to a more harmonious and just world, where the flourishing of all living beings is valued and protected.

The Ethics of Non-Violence and Interconnectedness

Both traditions view non-violence (Ahimsa) as the foundation of all ethical behavior. This nonviolence is not limited to human interactions but extends to all living beings, including animals and the environment. In Buddhist ethics, Ahimsa is connected to the practice of compassion (Karuna), which calls for empathy toward all sentient beings. In Jainism, Ahimsa is a more rigorous ethical discipline, with strict guidelines to avoid causing harm in any form—whether through action, speech, or even thought.

The interconnectedness of all life is a central tenet of both traditions. Buddhism teaches that all beings are interconnected and that suffering arises from ignorance and attachment. By cultivating mindfulness and awareness, individuals can transcend selfish desires and promote harmony with others and the world around them. Jainism teaches that the soul is bound to the cycle of birth and death (samsara) through the accumulation of karma. Non-violence and asceticism are seen as ways to purify the soul and attain liberation (moksha), ultimately leading to a harmonious relationship with the world.

Defining the Subaltern

The term “subaltern,” as introduced by Antonio Gramsci and later popularized by Gayatri Spivak, refers to groups that are marginalized and oppressed in society. The subaltern is not merely someone who is economically or socially disadvantaged but someone whose voice and worldview have been silenced or excluded by dominant cultural, political, and economic systems.

In the context of ethical frameworks, the subaltern perspective critiques mainstream models that prioritize the interests of the powerful and wealthy while ignoring the voices and needs of marginalized groups. By reclaiming indigenous wisdom, the subaltern challenges the dominance of Western and mainstream Indian ethical systems and seeks to highlight alternative perspectives that prioritize social and environmental justice.

Subaltern Critique of Mainstream Ethical Frameworks

From a subaltern perspective, mainstream ethical frameworks, both Western and Indian, often fail to address the needs of the marginalized. Economic growth models that prioritize individualism and material success often ignore the social and ecological costs of these pursuits. For example, the industrialization and economic development strategies in India, while successful in boosting GDP, have also led to massive environmental destruction, displacement of rural populations, and the erosion of traditional knowledge systems.

In contrast, the ethical principles of Buddhism and Jainism, with their emphasis on non-violence, interconnectedness, and ecological balance, provide a critique of these dominant systems. Both traditions offer alternatives that prioritize community well-being, environmental sustainability, and moral integrity. By returning to these indigenous systems, the subaltern perspective advocates for a more inclusive, holistic, and ecologically conscious approach to ethics.

Jainism: The Rigorous Path of Non-Violence

Jainism offers a stricter ethical framework, with a focus on non-violence (Ahimsa) in all aspects of life. Jains believe that every living being, no matter how small, has a soul and deserves to be treated with respect. This commitment to nonviolence extends beyond human beings to include animals, insects, and even plants.

Jainism's ethical practices, such as vegetarianism and asceticism, provide concrete solutions to contemporary environmental issues. By avoiding harm to animals and living in a way that minimizes one's ecological footprint, Jains demonstrate how ethical living can contribute to a more sustainable and just world.

Jainism's emphasis on self-discipline, nonviolence, and the avoidance of harm offers a powerful critique of mainstream ethical frameworks that prioritize consumption and individual success at the expense of the environment and social well-being.

Conclusion

Buddhism and Jainism offer compelling ethical alternatives to the dominant frameworks of material progress, individualism, and economic growth. By emphasizing nonviolence, interconnectedness, and mindful living, these indigenous systems provide valuable insights into how we can address the pressing challenges of our time—social inequality, environmental degradation, and moral disillusionment.

From a subaltern perspective, these traditions challenge the dominant ethical systems that often neglect the needs of the marginalized and the environment. By reclaiming indigenous wisdom, we can develop a more inclusive, sustainable, and ecologically harmonious future. In a world increasingly defined by global crises, the ethical teachings of Buddhism and Jainism offer not only a critique of mainstream models but also a path forward—one rooted in compassion, community, and ecological responsibility