

The Contemporary Relevance of Ratnatraya in Jain Philosophy: An Ethical and Epistemological Inquiry

Tufan Ali Sheikh

Assistant Professor
Mahitosh Nandy Mahavidyalaya
Jangipara, Hooghly, West Bengal, India.
Email: stufanali@gmail.com
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Abstract: The Jain philosophy is one of the major philosophical traditions of Indian philosophical traditions. It is a deeply spiritual and ethical philosophy. The Jain thinkers do not believe in the existence of God or in the authority of the Vedic scriptures. Therefore, Jain philosophy is called *nastika darsana*. However, they believe in *Moksha* or liberation of the soul. The core ethical principle of Jainism is compassion and non-violence toward all living beings.

In the contemporary world, marked by increasing violence and social discord, The Jain Tirthankaras advocate peace and harmony through the Ratnatraya – *Samyak Darsana*, *Samyak jnana* and *Samyak charitra*. Jain philosophy articulates that Ratnatraya constitutes the foundation of Jain ethics.

Traditionally articulated in the *Tattvartha Sutra* as the necessary and sufficient conditions for *moksha*, this triad invites renewed philosophical scrutiny in light of 21st -century crises. This paper argues that beyond its eschatological function, the Ratnatraya offers a coherent apparatus for addressing ecological degradation, epistemic polarization, and ethical uncertainty. *Samyak Darshana*, grounded in the Jain ontology of *jiva-ajiva* and the principle of *ahimsa*, provides conceptual resources for non-anthropocentric environmental ethics. *Samyak Jnana*, articulated through *Anekantavada* and *Syadvada*, advances a model of epistemic pluralism and fallibilism pertinent to misinformation and ideological dogmatism in digital public spheres. *Samyak Charitra*, enacted through vows of restraint and *aparigraha*, proposes a paradigm of sustainable agency that critiques consumer capitalism and aligns with contemporary virtue ethics. While originating in monastic contexts, the Ratnatraya demonstrates adaptability for secular ethical and epistemological discourse. The paper concludes by considering limitations and future applications in education, policy, and interfaith dialogue.

Keywords: *Nastika Darsana*, *Ratnatraya*, *Samyak Darshana*, *Samyak Jnana*, *Samyak Charitra*.

1. Introduction:

Jainism stands as one of the important ancient Indian spiritual and cultural traditions, developed with the aim of promoting human well-being. The word '*Jainism*' is derived from '*Jina*' referring to one who has overcome inner passions and desires. All the twenty-four Tirthankaras are revered as '*Jinas*' because they conquered all karmic passions and achieved liberation. It is believed that all human beings have the potential to become '*Jina*'. In fact, human beings can attain the ultimate goal i.e., *Moksha* or liberation which depends upon its own karma and purity of effort. At the core of this effort lies the Ratnatraya, or the Three Jewels: Right Faith, Right Knowledge, and Right Conduct. The opening sutra of the *Tattvartha Sutra* declares:

“*samyagdarshanajnanacharitrani mokshamargah*”

—Acharya Umaswami

— these three constitute the path to liberation. Classical commentators have consistently emphasized that the three are co-necessary. Faith without knowledge becomes blind, knowledge without conduct becomes sterile, and conduct without the right orientation risks

misdirection (Jaini 1998: 168).

Historically, scholarship on the *Ratnatraya* has focused on its soteriological mechanics — how it arrests karmic influx and facilitates the shedding of karma. However, the 21st century presents normative challenges that extend beyond individual liberation. Climate change, mass extinction, digital misinformation, and global consumerism demand philosophical frameworks that can address structural as well as personal transformation. In this context, the *Ratnatraya* warrants re-examination not merely as a religious path, but as a secular ethical and epistemological resource.

This paper contends that the *Ratnatraya* retains contemporary relevance precisely because it integrates ontology, epistemology, and ethics into a single practice. *Samyak Darshana* offers a metaphysical reorientation relevant to environmental philosophy. *Samyak Jnana* provides epistemic tools to navigate pluralism and polarization. *Samyak Charitra* translates both into practices of restraint that speak directly to debates in sustainability and virtue ethics.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 clarifies the conceptual architecture of the Three Jewels using primary and secondary Jain sources. Section 3 examines *Samyak Darshana* in dialogue with environmental ethics. Section 4 analyses *Samyak Jnana* in relation to epistemic crises in the digital age. Section 5 explores *Samyak Charitra* as a model of sustainable agency. Section 6 concludes by summarizing contributions, acknowledging limitations, and suggesting future directions.

2. Conceptual Foundations of Ratnatraya in Jain Thought:

The *Ratnatraya* is not a list of three independent virtues but an integrated structure. *Umasvati*'s formulation implies mutual dependence: liberation requires simultaneous alignment at the levels of perception, cognition, and action.

2.1 Samyak Darshana: Right Faith as Ontological Commitment:

The term '*darshana*' is commonly rendered as "faith," but in *Jain* epistemology, it denotes "right vision" or "right perspective." It is the removal of *mithyatva*, the fundamental misapprehension of reality (Dundas 2002: 92). This misapprehension consists in seeing the self as permanent, the body as the self, and the world as existing solely for human use. *Samyak Darshana* corrects this by affirming two Jain metaphysical principles. First, the universe is composed of *jiva* and *ajiva*. *Jiva*, or living substance, is characterized by consciousness and is present in humans, animals, plants, and even microscopic beings. Second, all *jivas* possess intrinsic worth. This ontological claim directly underwrites the ethical principle of *ahimsa*. Thus, *Darshana* is not propositional belief but a perceptual shift. It is analogous to what contemporary environmental philosophers call a "paradigm shift" from anthropocentrism to biocentrism. Without this shift, ethical injunctions remain external impositions.

2.2 Samyak Jnana: Right Knowledge as Epistemic Pluralism:

If *Darshana* provides orientation, *Jnana* provides informs. *Samyak Jnana* refers to knowledge that is definite, non-erroneous, and free from doubt. Its distinctiveness lies in its methodology. Jain epistemology denies the possibility of absolute, single-perspective knowledge. Instead, it proposes *Anekantavada*, the doctrine that reality has infinite aspects — and *Syadvada* — the doctrine that any assertion must be qualified as true "in some respect" (Dundas, 2002). This does not amount to relativism. Jainism affirms that the existence of an objective reality, while holding human access to it is inherently limited and partial. Hence, rationality demands affirming one's own position while remaining receptive to others. This framework embeds epistemic humility. Thus, Knowledge thus becomes a prac-

tice of perspective coordinating viewpoints rather than asserting dominance. Deprived of *Darshana*, *Jnana* degenerates into instrumental rationality. Deprive of *Charitra*, it remains a disembodied abstraction.

2.3 Samyak Charitra: Right Conduct as Moral Self-Cultivation:

Charitra signifies the practical realization of insight. It enacted through a set of vows that give from everyday ethical living. The attainment of Right Conduct in Jainism is grounded in the observance of five foundational vows known as *Panchavratas*: *ahimsa* (abstention from violence), *satya* (commitment to truth), *asteya* (refraining from appropriation), *brahmacharya* self-restraint in sensuality), and *aparigraha* (detachment from possessions).

For monastics, these vows are upheld in their absolute form as the *Mahavratas*, entailing rigorous discipline across thought, speech, and action. For householders, the same principles are adapted as the *Anuvratas*, allowing for ethical engagement within familial and social responsibilities.

What unites both paths is the principle of restraint. *Aparigraha* contests the compulsion to accumulate, while *ahimsa* structures the manner in which one relates to other living beings. In Jain thought, conduct is not treated as subordinate to knowledge, but as the very sphere in which knowledge is embodied and validated. Because karmic influx occurs through embodied action, emancipation requires a fundamental reorientation of conduct. Here Jainism aligns with virtue ethics, which likewise privileges the cultivation of moral character over strict adherence to codified rules.

3. Samyak Darshana and Contemporary Environmental Ethics:

The geological epoch of the Anthropocene has laid bare the conceptual constraints of ethics that place the human species at the centre. By framing non-human entities primarily in terms of utility, such frameworks have proven inadequate to address ecological collapse. In this context, *Samyak Darshana* provides an alternative ontological and ethical starting point. It reorients the human subject not as the proprietor of nature, but as one *jiva* among many within an interdependent cosmos.

3.1 Critique of Anthropocentrism:

Contemporary environmental governance continues to instrumentalize nature. Even paradigms such as “sustainable development” are often operationalized as the indefinite sustenance of human economies rather than the integrity of ecosystems themselves. *Samyak Darshana* fundamentally contests this anthropocentric axiom. Within Jain metaphysics, the attribution of *jiva* is not limited to sentient animals. It is extended to vegetal life, elemental bodies, and microorganisms (Chapple, 2006, p. 23). Consequently, the scope of moral considerability is radically broadened beyond the boundaries typically recognized in Western ethical traditions. This position should not be conflated with pantheism. Rather, Jainism proposes a graded ontology: all life possesses consciousness to varying degrees and therefore warrants ethical regard, albeit in differing forms and intensities. This framework dismantles the rigid human/non-human binary that underwrites much of modern environmental law and policy. It suggests that ethical responsibility begins not with human interest, but with the recognition that the flourishing of other life-forms is constitutive of, not incidental to, human flourishing. In an age of mass extinction and climate crisis, such a reorientation moves ethics from resource management to coexistence.

3.2 Ahimsa as an Ecological Principle:

While *ahimsa* is most commonly associated with dietary restraint in popular discourse, within the framework of *Darshana* it assumes a far broader ecological significance. It de-

mands a systematic audit of the violence that is embedded within contemporary infrastructures of production, distribution, and disposal. This includes the energy regimes that drive extraction, the supply chains that externalize harm, and the waste streams that accumulate in land and water bodies.

For instance, industries such as fast fashion and industrial agriculture generate extensive harm to *jivas* not only through direct killing, but through habitat destruction, chemical runoff, and pesticide application. From a Jain perspective, such systemic violence cannot be dismissed as indirect or negligible.

Accordingly, *ahimsa* grounds a precautionary ethic: where the potential for harm is uncertain, restraint is the default response. Chapple (2006, p. 31) observes that this orientation brings Jainism into dialogue with deep ecology's commitment to biocentric equality. However, a critical distinction remains. Whereas deep ecology often locates intrinsic value in ecosystem processes, Jainism grounds value directly in life itself, in the capacity of *jiva* to experience and persist.

3.3 *Aparigraha* and Sustainable Consumption:

Consumer capitalism is structurally dependent on the logic of perpetual expansion. *Samyak Darshana*, when integrated with the vow of *aparigraha*, provides a direct critique of the acquisitive desire that animates this system. Instead of maximizing utility or profit, it proposes the principle of sufficiency: the deliberate limitation of wants in relation to need.

This ethical stance finds contemporary resonance in degrowth scholarship and the voluntary simplicity movement, both of which challenge growth as a measure of well-being. The Jain tradition offers a historical precedent for such practice. Jain mercantile communities across India have long institutionalized norms of restrained profit, trusteeship, and philanthropic redistribution. These practices illustrate that *aparigraha* is not incompatible with market participation, but rather reorients it toward moderation, reciprocity, and long-term viability.

In this way, *aparigraha* functions as both a personal discipline and a socio-economic critique. It shifts the focus from accumulation to adequacy, and from ownership to responsibility.

3.4 Dialogue and Difference:

A recurring critique holds that Jainism, with its ascetic orientation, is ill-equipped to engage with the domain of public policy. Such an assessment, however, misreads the function of *Darshana*. *Darshana* does not operate at the level of statutory prescription. Its contribution is more fundamental: it reconstitutes the perceptual and ethical horizon from which policy deliberation proceeds. Rather than offering a codified set of laws, it cultivates a disposition of restraint, non-violence, and pluralism that must inform the formation of law itself. In this sense, Jainism addresses policy not by dictating outcomes, but by transforming the subject who makes them.

4. *Samyak Jnana* and the Crisis of Epistemology in the Digital Age:

The digital infrastructure has produced a paradox. It has democratized access to information while simultaneously fracturing the conditions for shared knowledge. Algorithms, echo chambers, and the acceleration of content have given rise to what can be termed epistemic fragmentation: the collapse of a common ground from which truth claims can be negotiated.

4.1 *Anekantavada* and *Syadvada* as Method:

At the core of Jain epistemology lie two methodological principles: *anekantavada* and *syadvada*. *Anekantavada* advances an ontological claim that reality is irreducibly multifacet-

ed. No single vantage point, discourse, or conceptual schema can exhaust its complexity. *Syadvada* translates this ontological insight into a linguistic practice. It requires that every assertion be qualified: “from this standpoint, and under these conditions, it is thus.”

This stands in direct opposition to the absolutist grammar that dominates digital discourse — declarations of certainty, the policing of “truth” versus “falsehood,” and the erasure of nuance. By contrast, *syadvada* cultivates intellectual humility. It invites provisionally, conditionality, and the practice of listening across difference (Dundas, 2002, p. 48). As a method for the digital age, it does not resolve disagreement, but it transforms how disagreement is held: from antagonism to dialogue.

4.2 Addressing Misinformation and Polarization:

Algorithmic architectures are designed to maximize engagement, and in doing so they generate epistemic enclosures: echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing commitments and filter out dissent. *Samyak Jnana* responds to this condition with an epistemic virtue. It enjoins the knower to first seek the *naya* — the standpoint, method, and partial truth — of the other prior to judgment.

This is not mere tolerance. It functions as a structural counter to confirmation bias, which is the tendency to select and interpret information in ways that confirm prior beliefs. Within interfaith dialogue, Jain scholars have historically mobilized *anekantavada* not as syncretism, which dissolves difference, but as a logic of co-existence. It permits the acknowledgment of irreconcilable differences while simultaneously identifying provisional points of ethical and conceptual overlap. In this way, common ground is not presupposed but constructed through dialogue.

4.3 Comparison with Western Epistemology:

Jain epistemology bears elective affinities with certain currents in Western thought, yet departs from them decisively. Like Karl Popper’s principle of falsificationism, Jainism institutionalizes revisability: knowledge claims are held as provisional and open to correction. Like postmodern critiques, it foregrounds perspectivalism: all knowing is situated, partial, and mediated.

However, Jainism introduces a dimension absent in both. It binds epistemic practice to ethical practice. To assert one’s perspective as absolute, exclusive, and final is to commit a form of intellectual *himsa* — a violence against the ontological plurality of reality and against the other as a knower. Thus, *jnana* and *charitra* are not separate domains. Right knowing necessarily issues in right conduct.

4.4 Application: Pedagogy for the Digital Age:

The principles of *syadvada* can be operationalized within media literacy education. Rather than training students to adjudicate between “true” and “false” in absolute terms, curricula could train them in epistemic qualification. This involves framing claims conditionally: “from this source,” “within this framework,” “to this extent.” Such linguistic discipline cultivates cognitive flexibility and reduces polarization. It shifts discourse from the mode of assertion to the mode of inquiry. By embedding *syadvada* into education, we would not eliminate disagreement, but we would change its quality — from combat to conversation, from dogma to deliberation.

5. *Samyak Charitra* and the Ethics of Self-Regulated Agency:

If *Darshana* reorients vision and *Jnana* refines knowing, then *Charitra* is the site where philosophy is enacted as embodied practice. It translates epistemic and ethical insight into lived discipline.

5.1 *Vratas* as Technologies of the Self:

The *vratas* should not be read as juridical prohibitions. They function as technologies of the self: pedagogical regimens designed to cultivate attentiveness, restraint, and reflexivity. Contemporary cognitive and behavioural science corroborates this model, identifying repeated practice and habit formation as central mechanisms of durable behavioural change. Thus, *Charitra* anticipates what modern psychology now theorizes — a practical science of virtue formation grounded in daily conduct.

5.2 *Aparigraha* and the Critique of Consumerism:

Aparigraha does not prescribe ascetic poverty. It poses a different question entirely: what constitutes sufficiency? In the context of climate destabilization and ecological overshoot, this question becomes existential. Empirical data indicate that the consumption patterns and

carbon emissions of the affluent exceed planetary boundaries by orders of magnitude. *Aparigraha* provides an internally grounded normative framework for voluntary limitation — a basis for restraint that does not depend on external coercion or state regulation.

5.3 Mental Well-being and Self-Mastery:

Classical Jain texts articulate a direct correlation between ethical conduct and cognitive-affective clarity. The attenuation of greed, aversion, and anger is presented not merely as moral purification but as a condition for the reduction of *dukkha*. This insight converges significantly with contemporary research on mindfulness, emotion regulation, and psychological well-being. Consequently, *Charitra* is not to be understood as self-denial. It is better understood as self-mastery: the cultivation of agency over impulses that otherwise govern the self.

5.4 Limitations and the Problem of Translation:

The ascetic ideal articulated within the *Ratnatraya* may appear to be at odds with the conditions of contemporary lay life. Its demands for radical restraint can seem incommensurable with modern economies and social structures. However, the tradition of *anuvrata* — the lesser vows for householders — demonstrates that the core logic is adaptable. The central hermeneutic challenge, therefore, is not whether adaptation is possible, but how to translate the intensity of monastic discipline into lay contexts without diluting its transformative force. This requires moving from literal emulation to structural analogy.

6. Conclusion: The *Ratnatraya* as a Critical Framework:

This paper has advanced the thesis that the *Ratnatraya* constitutes more than a soteriological path. It functions as an integrated philosophical system that coordinates ontology, epistemology, and ethics. *Samyak Darshana* effects an ecological reorientation by decentering the human. *Samyak Jnana* effects an epistemic reorientation by institutionalizing plurality and provisionality. *Samyak Charitra* effects an ethical reorientation by grounding agency in self-limitation rather than self-expansion.

The relevance of this framework to contemporary crises is threefold. First, it furnishes a non-anthropocentric metaphysical grounding for environmental ethics, one that does not reduce the value of nature to instrumental utility. Second, it offers *anekantavada* and *syadvada* as methodological resources for engaging deep pluralism without collapsing into relativism or absolutism. Third, it proposes a model of human agency centered on *aparigraha* — on sufficiency, care, and restraint — as an alternative to the dominant paradigm of accumulation and growth. Certain limitations must be acknowledged. The framework's ontological commitments to *jiva* and karma may encounter friction within secular, materialist discourses. Moreover, its origins in ascetic practice necessitate careful and critical adaptation if it is

to speak to policy and public life. Despite these challenges, the core imperatives of the *Ratnatraya* — epistemic humility, non-violence as a principle of relation, and self-restraint as a principle of economy — address pathologies central to our present age. Future research might productively explore the pedagogical integration of *anekantavada* in digital literacy, and the application of *aparigraha* to climate and economic policy.

In a moment defined by ecological breakdown and epistemic fracture, the Three Jewels offer a final reminder: transformation does not begin with new technologies or new laws, but with a change in perception, a change in knowing, and a change in how we inhabit the world.

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