

Ahimsa and Aparigraha in Global Conflict: Acharanga Sutra Insights on Peace

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Abstract

Modern global crises—from devastating wars in Ukraine and Gaza to the slow violence of climate change and resource depletion—stem from deep-seated patterns of aggression and avarice. This paper re-examines the anatomy of global conflict through the Jain ethical principles of Ahimsa (nonviolence) and Aparigraha (non-possessiveness or restraint), with scriptural guidance from the ancient Acharanga Sutra. Jain teachings insist that all life is interconnected and sacred, and that harm to others ultimately harms oneself. They likewise warn that attachment and greed (parigraha) breed fear, rivalry, and violence. In applying these ideals, the paper links Ahimsa to contemporary calls for nonviolent conflict resolution, humanitarian law, and a culture of peace, and it links Aparigraha to sustainable consumption, equitable economies, and environmental stewardship. Case studies illustrate these links: the role of territorial attachment in fueling war, the impact of overconsumption on climate-induced conflicts, and how policies of restraint and renunciation could mitigate such challenges. The analysis argues that implementing Jain principles in global governance—through policies of disarmament, climate justice, and compassionate development—addresses not only symptoms but the ethical and structural roots of conflict. Ultimately, a shift toward nonviolence and non-attachment is presented as critical for achieving sustainable global peace.

Introduction

The contemporary world faces a dual crisis of violence and ecological breakdown. On one hand, interstate and civil wars continue to inflict mass suffering; on the other, unsustainable exploitation of nature brings climate disruptions that exacerbate poverty and displacement. Standard explanations in international relations cite power politics, security dilemmas, and resource competition as drivers of these conflicts. Yet beneath these factors lie moral and psychological forces: the willingness to inflict harm and the insatiable desire for dominance or wealth. Jain philosophy identifies these very impulses—violence (himsa) and possessiveness (parigraha)—as root causes of turmoil. While mainstream approaches often treat war and environmental exploitation as separate issues,

Jain ethics see them as intertwined symptoms of humanity's failure to practice restraint and compassion.

Over two millennia ago, Jain scriptures like the Acharanga Sutra stressed carefulness toward all life and renunciation of excess. These ancient teachings are strikingly relevant today. They imply that sustainable peace requires not only political agreements or technological fixes, but a shift in values: nonviolence in conflict resolution and contentment instead of greed. In this spirit, the following analysis applies Ahimsa and Aparigraha to contemporary issues: first examining ecological overconsumption and climate-driven upheavals, then addressing direct violence and war. Throughout, we argue that nonviolent diplomacy, restrained consumption, and equitable sharing-rooted in Jain ethics can remedy the moral deficits at the heart of global crises.

Jain Ethics of Nonviolence and Restraint

Ahimsa, often translated as nonviolence, is the cornerstone of Jain ethics. More than refraining from physical violence, Ahimsa entails an active stance of compassion and care toward all living beings. Jain teachings stress that violence is not only in the act but in the intent-hatred, cruelty, and even callous indifference are forms of himsa. True Ahimsa requires nonviolence in thought, speech, and action alike. The Acharanga Sutra vividly illustrates this ideal: it describes the world as “afflicted, miserable... full of pain,” caused by the ignorant harming of others. Mahavira is depicted walking carefully to avoid stepping on insects, and even the thought of subduing another being is condemned as violence (bhava himsa). In Jain understanding, all souls, whether human, animal, or elemental-have inherent values and strive to avoid suffering. From this perspective, warfare, cruelty to animals, and ecological destruction are all violations of Ahimsa, differing only in scale.

Ahimsa is not simply one virtue among others but the organising principle of the entire ethical system: as the first of the five great vows (ahimsa, satya, asteya, brahmacharya, aparigraha), it frames the meaning of truthfulness, non-stealing, sexual restraint and non-possession rather than merely standing beside them. Jain authors distinguish multiple ways of being violent through direct injury, through causing or commissioning others to injure, and through approving injury carried out by others-and they insist that each of these can be enacted by body, speech or mind. The result is a conception of responsibility that extends far beyond “I did not hit anyone”: one is implicated in violence whenever one orders, facilitates, condones or silently accepts harm.

Jainism classifies living beings according to the number of senses they possess, from one-sensed beings such as earth, water and plant-bodies up to five sensed beings such as animals and humans. Because jivas pervade so many kinds of entities, even apparently

innocent activities-walking, breathing, drinking unfiltered water-inevitably risk injury to unseen forms of life. Hence the famous demanding norms for mendicants: slow, mindful movement, the use of filters, carefully regulated diets and periods of prescribed immobility during the rainy season to minimize harm to proliferating microorganisms. Laypeople are bound by less radical versions of the same ideal, but the direction is identical: rigorous attention to the ways one's consumption, speech and habits generate avoidable suffering. Within this framework, violence is not only morally regrettable but also spiritually disastrous, binding the soul to karmic matter, whereas sustained practice of Ahimsa-supported by restraint and mental discipline-opens the path toward purification and eventual liberation.

Aparigraha, the virtue of non-possessiveness or non-attachment, complements Ahimsa by targeting the root causes of violence. Jain texts teach that attachment to worldly things-wealth, land, or even opinions-binds individuals to a cycle of desire and fear. As an aphorism puts it: "Possessions breed attachment; attachment breeds fear of loss and greed for more." The Jain path therefore advocates limiting one's possessions and desires, observing that the pursuit of endless material gain leads to rivalry and conflict. Importantly, Aparigraha is not mere asceticism for monks; it is a mindset of contentment that everyone can cultivate. Jain monks practice Aparigraha in extremis (owning nothing), while laypeople are enjoined to limit possessions (parigraha-parimana) and live simply. By minimizing economic inequality and restraining excess consumption, such non-possessiveness reduces the greed, jealousy, and ego that fuel social conflict. In essence, greed and violence are two sides of the same coin-renouncing; the first greatly diminishes the second.

This doctrine of limiting desires and possessions can be translated, for contemporary policy and everyday practice, into seven interrelated values:

- Rethink – examine whether a given want reflects a genuine requirement or an inflated desire.
- Reduce – cut back on unnecessary, high-impact material consumption.
- Replace – move away from single-use goods toward durable, repairable products and shared services.
- Reuse – circulate underused items to others, especially those who are less privileged. Recycle – transform discarded materials into new, useful products with deliberate effort and planning.
- Regulate – adopt personal and collective rules that constrain harmful patterns of acquisition and use.

- Research – continuously seek new, less harmful ways of living, recognising that an inquiring mind can generate creative, low-violence alternatives.

Ecological Crisis, Climate Migration, and Aparigraha

Having outlined the ethical foundations of Ahimsa and Aparigraha, we can now examine how these principles illuminate the ecological drivers of contemporary conflict. The ecological dimension of global conflict is increasingly evident. Climate change-driven by excessive consumption of fossil fuels and destruction of ecosystems- leads to resource scarcities and forces populations to migrate. Jain philosophy offers a prescient understanding of these issues: harming nature is a form of violence that inevitably reverberates back onto humanity. The Acharanga Sutra portrays elements like earth, water, air, and fire as teeming with life (or life-supporting beings) and thus deserving reverence. “He who injures these does not comprehend the sinful acts... the wise do not act so,” it admonishes. To pollute a river or level a forest is not only imprudent but a transgression against this sacred web of life. Modern ecological ethics echo this sentiment, emphasizing the interdependence of ecosystems and human survival.

The principle of Aparigraha is directly applicable to today’s environmental crisis. At its heart, climate change is a result of overconsumption-the opposite of restraint. Industrialized societies have treated the atmosphere and Earth’s resources as limitless possessions to exploit. This “greed of nations” leads to what Jain thinkers would deem collective karma, manifesting as floods, droughts, and the displacement of millions of vulnerable people. Jainism would urge an immediate pivot to limiting consumption and desires at both individual and collective levels. In practice, this means reorienting economies away from mindless growth and toward sustainability. As contemporary interpreters note, Aparigraha offers an answer to rampant consumerism and its fallout: by curbing unnecessary wants, we directly tackle resource depletion, climate change, and biodiversity loss. Indeed, only by accepting limits to wealth and consumption can humanity achieve lasting peace and happiness-a point underscored by evidence that beyond a certain point, more material wealth does not equate to greater well-being.

Jain ethics also demands equity. Stark imbalances in resource consumption are seen as a form of violence; thus, wealthy nations have a duty to reduce their carbon footprint and assist vulnerable communities as an obligation of non-harm. In the Jain spirit, helping climate refugees and hard-hit populations is not charity but a moral responsibility stemming from Ahimsa. We can imagine policies guided by these values: for example, international agreements to leave fossil fuels in the ground (foregoing short-term profit for the greater good) and robust support for communities facing

climate-induced displacement. By reducing attachment to luxury emissions and responding to crisis with compassion rather than exclusion, the international community would be practicing Aparigraha and Ahimsa on a global scale.

Violent Conflict, War, and the Imperative of Ahimsa

While the previous section considered the ecological roots of conflict through Aparigraha, this section turns to organised violence and war as the most direct violation of Ahimsa. The specter of war—be it the high-intensity battles in Ukraine or the recurring violence in Gaza—represents the most direct contradiction of Ahimsa. Jainism unequivocally views deliberate killing and cruelty as among the worst human actions, accruing heavy karma and perpetuating cycles of enmity. Jain ethics thus holds that even violence in self-defense is a tragic last resort. The cycle of retaliation must be broken by forgiveness and restraint: in protracted conflicts, showing compassion and ceasing to repay hurt with hurt is needed to break the cycle of hatred. In Gaza, decades of bloodshed have entrenched hatred; a Jain perspective would urge unilateral gestures of mercy and dialogue to break this pattern.

In Ukraine, the war can be seen as an extreme assertion of possessiveness—an attempt to seize land and power in violation of Aparigraha—while it flagrantly violates Ahimsa. A Jain-inspired response would press for nonviolent solutions: relentless diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and principled resistance. Even when defensive force is deployed, it should be minimized and devoid of hatred, reflecting the principle that lesser violence is better than greater. This aligns with modern humanitarian law, which insists on limiting harm and protecting innocents even in war. Crucially, Jainism emphasizes the mindset behind actions: violence is magnified when driven by hate or vengeance. Thus, leaders and citizens in conflict should cultivate empathy for the adversary’s humanity, even while opposing their actions. Such an attitude seeing war as a tragic necessity to be ended quickly, not an opportunity for domination resonates with Ahimsa. It opens space for negotiations, ceasefires, and ultimately reconciliation once fighting ceases. Likewise, Aparigraha in wartime would mean renouncing any aim of conquest or total victory. Peace may require each side to relinquish exclusive claims (whether to territory or vindication) – an application of non-attachment – and to focus instead on saving lives and restoring harmony. In sum, Jain ethics would have us pursue peace not through subjugation of the enemy, but through a mutual renunciation of hostility and greed.

Toward a Nonviolent and Sustainable Global Order

Elements of Ahimsa and Aparigraha can already be discerned in various global initiatives. The United Nations’ advocacy of a “culture of peace,” the legacy of Gandhian

nonviolence in civil resistance movements, and the inclusion of sustainability goals in international agendas all resonate with Jain values. To push these ideas further, policymakers and citizens must consciously embrace restraint and empathy as guiding principles, not just as tactical choices. This might involve reorienting education to teach global citizenship and the ethics of non-harm, and exercising political courage – for example, leaders reducing military expenditures in favor of conflict prevention and climate adaptation or enforcing environmental regulations despite corporate opposition. Such steps reflect putting long-term collective well-being above narrow self-interest, embodying Aparigraha at the policy level. In economic terms, Aparigraha calls for curbing excessive accumulation and redefining progress (for example, measuring well-being instead of just GDP. In managing natural resources, it means cooperation instead of competition-nations sharing essential materials and technology rather than hoarding or weaponizing them. These approaches align with emerging ideas of a circular economy and global public goods. They also address security concerns: for instance, if states treat critical minerals or water supplies as shared trusts rather than geopolitical weapons, the risk of resource wars diminishes. Ultimately, a Jain-inspired global order emphasizes that external peace grows from inner virtue. It requires both structural change and personal commitment. While we may never achieve the total nonviolence of a Jain monk, the direction of our efforts can align with Ahimsa and Aparigraha: always aiming to reduce suffering and want, rather than increase them. In a nuclear-armed, environmentally stressed world, this ethos is not only morally sound but pragmatically urgent. As one Jain thinker poignantly noted, nonviolence is “supreme righteousness” and the surest means to save humanity from self-destruction.

Conclusion

Jain philosophy, through the twin pillars of Ahimsa and Aparigraha, offers a profound reimagining of what global peace and security could mean. Rather than viewing peace as merely the absence of war or a balance of power, it becomes a positive state achieved by upholding reverence for life and exercising restraint in desires. Many of today’s global conflicts, whether violent clashes or ecological crises-share common roots in violence and greed. Addressing these issues at their source requires more than political negotiation or technological innovation; it demands a shift in collective consciousness. We must learn, as Mahavira taught, to live and let live, extending friendship to all beings and relinquishing the grasping mindset that turns others and nature into objects of exploitation. Practically, this means integrating ethical and spiritual perspectives into policy discussions. Concepts like nonviolence and renunciation are not archaic ideals but essential to survival in an age of weapons of mass destruction and climate change. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the climate-

driven displacements-these are alarms sounding the need for a new paradigm. A Jain inspired paradigm would prioritize disarmament, dialogue, and development that honors all life. It would favor leaders who exercise restraint and empathy over those who brandish power and accumulation. Of course, no single philosophy has all the answers. Yet as a moral compass, Ahimsa and Aparigraha point humanity toward the only sustainable future: one where we renounce the path of violence and greed and instead cultivate a world of care, sharing, and peace.

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