

## Pankaj Jain, University of North Texas



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. Jain received the Fulbright-Nehru Environmental Leadership Fellowship in 2012 to study the cultures and sustainability initiatives in the Himalayas. He is also the director of the Eco-Dharma and Bhumi-Seva Project and is working with the Hindu and Jain temples in North America on their "greening" efforts.

An eminent scholar recently came to our university campus and spoke about the role of the diverse religious communities of the world and their attitudes toward the environment. He showed examples from several indigenous communities from North America, South America, Africa, and Asia. Yet when he referred to the traditions of India, he used these words: "India has the most bizarre culture in the world, where even a cobra is worshipped. This is a bit of an overshoot." It amazes me that even in this supposedly globalized world, India continues to mystify scholars.

### The Principle of Ahimsa

While most Americans are familiar with yoga and Bollywood, Indian perspectives toward ecology seem to be largely unknown. Although yoga is widely known in the West as a practice centered around physical postures, many westerners do not realize that yoga is actually a system of eight “limbs” or components. The first step of the first limb of yoga is ahimsa, the practice of nonviolence. Unless one is firmly rooted in ahimsa in one’s thoughts, speech, and actions, the true practice of yoga cannot begin. Through this practice of yoga, practitioners develop harmony with and reverence for nature.

For more than 2,500 years, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain teachers have expressed the value of ahimsa as a core principle of philosophy, spirituality, and ethics. Mahavira, the last great teacher of Jainism, even proclaimed that ahimsa is the greatest dharma, a term whose meanings include religion, ethics, duty, virtue, and cosmic law. According to most of these texts, ahimsa improves one’s karma. For observant Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists, hurting or harming another being damages one’s karma and obstructs advancement toward moksha (liberation). To prevent the accrual of bad karma, practitioners avoid activities associated with violence, follow a vegetarian diet, and oppose the institutionalized breeding and killing of animals, birds, and fish for human consumption. Meat consumption in India has historically been much less compared to other regions of the world.

### **Gandhi as an Exemplar of Ahimsa**

Despite our visiting scholar’s concerns, the protection of the cobra and other animals has a long, celebrated history in Indian religion and is a shining example of Indian environmentalism. Cobras are worshipped by many Hindus, especially on a specific festival dedicated to them — just as there are specific festivals for mountains, rivers, cows, trees, and hundreds of other gods and goddesses throughout India. Mahatma Gandhi once had a brief encounter with a cobra at his ashram (retreat), and he, too, did not want it to be killed. Gandhi’s principled practice of ahimsa aligns with the prevailing values of contemporary ecologists. As many scientific studies suggest, every being in nature is intrinsically valuable because all species are directly or indirectly dependent on each other’s survival; this is one fundamental reason why scientists and environmentalists seek to protect the biodiversity of our planet. Therefore even a cobra has the right to survive. Moreover, other beings have an intrinsic duty to protect it as long as it is not a threat to them.

When I first mentioned this story in the classroom, one of my students asked an important question. If Indians in India are not following the principles of Gandhi, how can we expect others to do so? Like many emerging nations today, India is enthusiastically aping the West with its ever-expanding economy and ever-shrinking natural resources. Similarly, at a conference on

“World Religions and Ecology,” a participant asked what non-Western countries expect of the West. If the rest of the world is eager to make the same mistakes the West did, what route should the West take to ensure the planet's survival? One answer might be for the West to embrace Gandhi and learn from his ecological practices. If the West is to remain an intellectual leader of the world, it must reform and transform itself. As long as the West continues to crave more natural resources without changing its lifestyle, it will continue to lack the moral authority to preach to other cultures. The West has led the world with its modern scientific and technological innovations for the last several centuries. It will have to be the West that emerges as a new ecological leader, with Gandhi as the foundation of its lifestyle. Without a deep transformation, all voices to save the planet's ecology are hollow rhetoric.

In America today, we wage “war on terrorism,” “war on climate change,” “war on drugs,” “war on corruption,” and “war on obesity.” From our physical, mental, and spiritual health to the well-being of the environment, global security, international peace, and social justice — all these efforts will benefit if we first become nonviolent in our most basic activity of eating and surviving. “We are what we eat.” It is such a simple statement and yet it is widely ignored all over the world. This is the way Gandhi lived every day. His protest against imperial power was influential because it was based on his own great life.

Gandhi's entire life can be seen as an ecological treatise. Every minute act, emotion, or thought functioned much like an ecosystem — his small meals of nuts and fruits, his morning ablutions, his everyday bodily practices, his periodic observances of silence, his morning walks, his cultivation of the small as much as of the big, his spinning wheel, and his abhorrence of waste. He rooted his life in the basic Hindu and Jain values of truth, nonviolence, celibacy, and fasting.

### **Gandhi's Inspiration to Indian Environmental Activists**

Gandhi's example is still a powerful force in modern India. Moralists, nonviolent activists, feminists, journalists, social reformers, trade union leaders, peasants, prohibitionists, nature-cure lovers, renouncers, and environmentalists all take their inspirations from Gandhi's life and other dharmic teachings. My book, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability*, chronicles my research with three communities in India and the diaspora to showcase ecological practices inspired by the Indic traditions.

Contemporary environmental activists and dharmic leaders have modeled their lives on the dharmic teachings of India and continue to resist the pressure of global consumerism. Sunderlal Bahuguna, now in his eighties, is the leader of the famous Chipko Movement in North India,

which used Gandhian-inspired nonviolence to protect trees from being cut down and to reclaim their traditional forest rights. Pandurang Hedge leads a Chipko-style movement in South India. Vandana Shiva is a fierce critic of Western-style globalism and capitalism, as is Ramachandra Guha, who has also criticized Western-style environmental approaches such as deep ecology. Medha Patkar is a strong voice against big dams in Central India. Anna Hazare, recently in the headlines for his major protest against political corruption, has engaged in extensive ecological experiments in his village in Central India. There are other leaders, along with hundreds of smaller voices spread all over India, that make it the nation experiencing the largest environmental movement on the planet (Christopher Chapple, *Hinduism and Ecology*, Harvard University Press, 2000).

Dozens of institutions in several Indian towns founded by Gandhi himself are still flourishing with their own small-scale production of textiles and agriculture. In addition, almost every Indian political party must at least use rhetoric based on Gandhi's values whenever there is a discussion on taking technology or any kind of aid from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, or other major Western power. Finally, several recent major Bollywood blockbusters with Gandhi-like figures are reminding vast audiences of the message of Gandhi — nonviolence coupled with civil disobedience.

Gandhi's immortal soul and other dharmic traditions of India are still vibrant even in the twenty-first century globalized, consumerist society. Several decades ago, in his nonviolent movement for civil rights, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method." It is again time to go back to these cherished values propounded by Christ, Gandhi, and King — nonviolence, not just toward other human beings, but also toward the entire earth.