



Ahimsa and Beyond: Animal Ethics in Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu Thought

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Abstract

The paper examines the philosophical underpinnings and animal ethics in the three leading Indian religions, namely, Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The core of this question is ahimsa (nonviolence), which can be seen as a connecting moral principle across these traditions, despite varying perceived and practiced variations. Jainism has made ahimsa the highest ideal of ethical conduct, requiring the strict avoidance of harm to all living organisms, even the smallest ones. Buddhism situates animal ethics within its broader ethics of compassion (karunā) and interdependence, and emphasizes the relational character of moral responsibility. Hindu ethics, both varied and stratified, incorporates animal ethics through dharma, karma, and respect for sacred animals, with a balance among ritual, symbolic, and ecological aspects. Comparing these traditions, the paper identifies the similarities and differences in their attitude to animal ethics. It shows that, according to Indian philosophies, there is a vision of ethical responsibility that goes beyond anthropocentric models, placing animals as entities within the moral world. Moreover, these views are echoed in modern discussions of environmental justice, environmental sustainability, and animal rights, which provide a counter-story to industrial exploitation and ecological disaster. The paper concludes that a reinterpretation and reexamination of Indian traditions of ahimsa and compassion can help shape global discourses on animal ethics to create a more humane, earth-conscious, and ethically inclusive future.



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Introduction

Ahimsa, meaning non-injury or, more simply, nonviolence, is an ethical principle in ancient Indian philosophy. Being a combination of the Sanskrit 'hims' (to strike or cause harm) and 'a', which means negation, ahimsa means literally the lack of harm or injury of any living being by an action, word, or even thought (Britannica, n.d.). Historically, it can be found in the Vedic period (c. 1500-500 BCE), in which it already appears in the Taittiriya Samhita of the Yajurveda (non-injury to the sacrifice-er), and in the Shatapatha Brahmana (in the sense of non-injury more generally). The first ethical use of animals (pashu-ahimsa) is found in the Kapisthala Katha Samhita of the Yajurveda c. 8th century BCE (Damodran, 1969). Though animal sacrifice was common in Vedic rituals, a move towards nonviolence emerged in later Vedic literature.

This development is brought out clearly in the Upanisads, which are philosophical texts accompanying the Vedas (c. 800-300 BCE). One of the oldest Upanishads, Chāndogya Upanisad, enumerates ahimsa as one of five key virtues, along with truthfulness (satya), straightforwardness (ārjava), charity (dāna), and austerity (tapas), and identifies it with ethical behaviour that helps to escape the phenomena of rebirth (Chāndogya Upanishad 3.17.4; Britannica, n.d.). The Chāndogya Upanisad (8.15.1) also stresses the idea of non-harm to all creatures (sarva-bhuta), with several exceptions in the ritual situation, as a shift towards sacrificial practice towards wider moral restraint (Hossain, 2025). These trends indicate an increased emphasis on compassion, renunciation, and the acknowledgment of interactive forms of life during the period of social and religious experimentation in ancient India.

Within animal ethics, these traditions see animals not only as resources but also as living beings who can suffer, karmic beings who can be reborn, or sacred, symbolic beings that represent the presence of deities. The Jain doctrine states that all beings possess souls (jīva) that have equal potential for liberation and that absolute non-harm is required of them. Buddhism demonstrates compassion (karunā) and loving-kindness (mettā) to sentient beings in the rebirth realms. In contrast, Hinduism tends to respect animals as embodiments of deities (e.g., the cow as sacred) or forces of cosmic order (ṛta) and dharma (Kemmerer, 2012; Krishna, 2010). Animals, therefore, make a connection between human and divine realms through karma, reincarnation, and interdependence.

The main research questions that are discussed in this paper are: How do Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions treat ahimsa differently: Jain absolutism to Buddhist pragmatism and Hindu

contextual application? What are the ethical aspects that go beyond nonviolence, like animal rights (freedom against exploitation), welfare (kindness in treatment), and spiritual liberation (one path to moksha or nirvana)?

The importance of these views is felt worldwide today. Ahimsa educates the modern animal rights movements, veganism, and ecological ethics to confront the industrial exploitation during biodiversity crises. The meaning of ahimsa, as interpreted by Mahatma Gandhi as compassion to the helpless (including animals), had a tremendous impact on the contemporary Indian animal protection, anti-vivisection, and animal welfare policy, as it regards the moral development of a nation through the way it treats animals (Jena, 2017; Akbarsha, 2010). When Gandhi applied nonviolence to animals, he bridged the gap between ancient ideals and political activism, thereby motivating interfaith and international activism.

Therefore, even though ahimsa is the common principle of non-harm in Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, animal ethics in these traditions go beyond it in terms of karma and rebirth, compassion, cosmic interdependence, dharma, and equality of souls to generate unique but complementary approaches of practical value in the study of animal welfare and environmental philosophy today.

Literature Review

Lisa Kemmerer's *Animals and World Religions* (2012) is a classic work on animal ethics, as it breaks down each major religion and provides specific chapters on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Kemmerer discusses the Bible, myths, models, and modern activists inspired by religious convictions regarding animal protection, highlighting how these traditions can foster kindness and nonviolence and criticize oppression (Kemmerer, 2012). *Sacred Animals of India* by Nanditha Krishna (2010) is dedicated to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, and it follows traditions that led to the adoration of animals in terms of karma, rebirth, and godly appearances. Krishna outlines sacred animals (e.g., cows, elephants) and practices such as protection against harm, and claims that this sanctity comes to life through interdependent life cycles (Krishna, 2010).

Peter Adamson's article, *Indian Animal Ethics* (2023), provides a brief philosophical introduction, making it clear that ahimsa is a fundamental principle requiring people not to be cruel to animals. Adamson postulates that ancient Indian logic, based on soul equality, karma, and rebirth, provides a better explanation for vegetarianism than utilitarianism, common in Western animal rights discussions (Adamson, 2023).

The present debates are centered on the rigid and moribund notions of ahimsa and whether vegetarianism is an ethical compulsion or a cultural activity. Jainism subjects nonviolence, including microorganisms, to an absolute imperative and the moral obligation of strict vegetarianism/veganism (Kemmerer, 2012). Buddhism is pragmatic about the middle way, and the Theravada exception regarding meat, grounded in the threefold purity rule, contrasts with the Mahayana's more vegetarian focus (Adamson, 2023). Hinduism is contextually flexible: after the Vedic transformation, animal sacrifice was accepted as part of Vedic practices; in some sects (including Vaisnavism), post-Vedic changes advocated ahimsa and vegetarianism, but dharma allowed exceptions on a case-by-case basis (or for geographical or other needs) (Krishna, 2010). Vegetarianism is culturally diverse, as it is often ethical in the sūtras and epics, though not universal; some scholars interpret vegetarianism as a marker of purity or even a social norm, although it is discussed as an issue of inconsistency in the modern context (such as in Pew Research Centre data of varying adherence) (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

These contributions notwithstanding, there remain gaps in comparative studies that focus on dimensions beyond ahimsa. Much of the literature dwells upon nonviolence itself, rather than its extensions, such as karma-rebirth abidance (open moral position across the species), Buddhist mindfulness and interdependence (pratīyasamutpāda), Jain soul egalitarianism, or Hindu ecological dharma and cosmic order (ṛta). The most recent literature is beginning to treat them (e.g., Adamson, 2023). However, little has been done to conduct thorough analyses that incorporate compassion, liberation potential, and environmental holism, especially in relating ancient literature to modern practice (e.g., animal rights, veganism, biodiversity ethics).

The paper attempts to fill these gaps by pre-empting beyond-ahimsa structures using textual and comparative approaches grounded in the current body of research to emphasize ancillary ethical resources.

Theoretical Framework: Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing

Building on an analysis of ahimsā, this study develops an original framework for Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing, hereafter referred to as 'Beyond Ahimsā'. Current research on nonviolence (Kemmerer, 2012; Valpey, 2020) within the three traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism offers a detailed descriptive analysis, the majority of these investigations limit their exploration of nonviolence to an examination of its avoidance of harm. This study goes on to explore the positive, relational, and ecological obligations towards animals and as participants in moral,

spiritual, and ecological webs of relations, in which they are not mere objects and are not to be harmed.

“Beyond Ahimsā,” therefore, involves three key levels or dimensions of positive, ecological, animal-oriented obligations. Firstly, there is the dimension of karmic reciprocity and species egalitarianism (Jainism), which, as mentioned earlier, relates to the ‘equal’ status of all jīvas (souls), as outlined in Tattvārtha Sūtra 5.21 (parasparopagraho jīvānām or ‘souls render service to one another’), as well as in terms of an ethic of mutual support and in terms of the practice of aparigraha (minimalism/ecological sensitivity) in order to not cause harm to any other living being. The second relevant dimension, therefore, would relate to Buddhist teachings of compassionate interdependence, as laid out through the aforementioned principle of pratīyasamutpāda (dependent origination), which also leads to the practice of Bodhisattvahood/Bodhicitta, with the goal of which is to actively work towards the complete and definitive ‘liberation’ of all sentient beings from their sufferings of duḥkha. To achieve this goal, a Bodhisattva cultivates karuṇā (compassion) and mettā (loving-kindness) towards all sentient beings, helping them on their own spiritual paths to freedom. In this context, the practice of ānāpāṇisati (mindful observation of the in- and out-breath) is well known for cultivating mettā (loving-kindness). Finally, the obligations of ‘Beyond Ahimsā’ involve a third level or dimension, which refers to Hindu teachings of cosmic stewardship. As outlined earlier, in this regard, humans have the divine assignment of protecting, honoring, respecting, and also serving their various species as a form of reverent and pious service to the Divine. All of this relates to the protection of ṛta (cosmic order) as well as to our relations to, and treatment of, nature in general as well as to prakṛti in her form as divine or in her form as the material, physical world that is to be conserved, for example, in the form of practices such as go-rakṣā (cow protection) which, in terms of dharma, enable a human being to fulfill his or her spiritual duties in life as a guardian/steward of the natural world.

The Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing thus recognizes that animals are karmically continuous with humans. Their flourishing or lack thereof is intrinsically tied to that of humans, positively or negatively impacting their spiritual growth and the health of the planet. In contrast to dominant Western animal ethics models of rights to life based on individualism (Regan) or sentience for the greater good (Singer) that view animals as largely separate from humans, this triadic model of nonviolence recognizes and can be motivated by the interdependent systemic relationships between all living beings, is guided by karmic reasons to treat animals well, and is

characterized by a focus on primarily positive obligations of care for all living beings within an ecological framework.

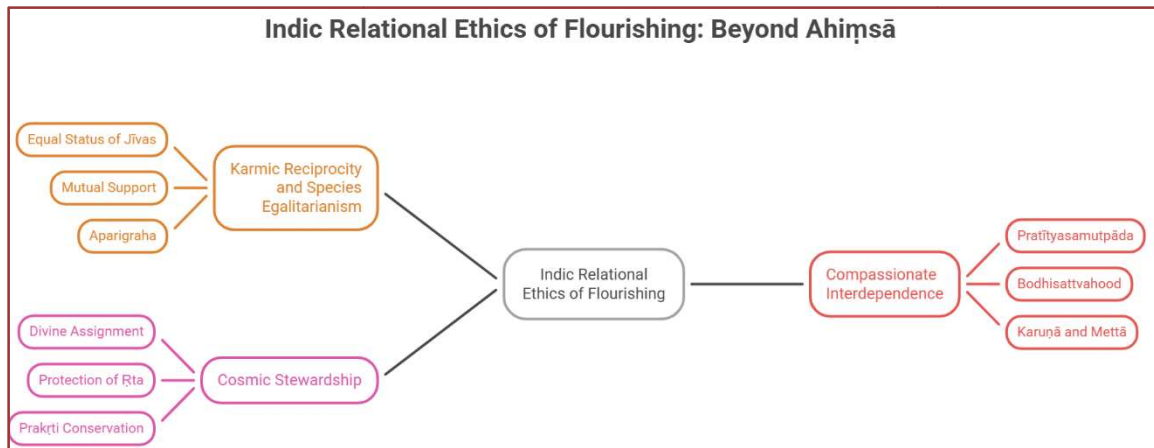


Figure 1 Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing: Beyond Ahimsa

This framework emerges from a hermeneutic study of primary texts. It seeks to synthesize the strengths of individual traditions in order to arrive at a coherent framework for the study of ethics.

Methodology

This study conducts a qualitative comparative textual analysis of animal ethics across the Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, focusing on the dimensions of ahimsa and its extensions. It uses historical and philosophical interpretations in a hermeneutic approach to re-read the classic texts of these religions, thereby arriving at new perspectives on animal welfare and environmental ethics.

We primarily draw on a selection of canonical texts—ancient and classical—that treat animals most explicitly. For Jainism, these are, primarily, the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* (trans. Jacobi, 1884/2008). In Buddhism, we employ the *Dhammapada*, the *Jātaka* tales, and the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. For Hinduism, our study of classical animal ethics relies most heavily on the *Upaniṣads* (especially the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*), *Bhagavad Gītā*, the laws of Manu (*Manu Smṛti*), and the various *Purāṇas*. The texts we selected were purposively sampled, with the criteria outlined above as our primary focus. Secondary sources have also been chosen to provide us with some interpretive framework and to allow us to engage in a fully comparative manner, for example, Kemmerer (2012), Krishna (2010), Valpey (2020), and Finnigan (2017).

The study applies a hermeneutic circle of reading as a method for analyzing the studied texts. The initial reading involves a literal translation of the selected passages followed by historical and cultural contextualization. This is, in turn, followed by a higher level of philosophical reading to understand the core concepts of the studied traditions, such as the equality of all jīvas, the reality of pratīyasamutpāda, and the concept of ṛta (cosmic order). The key concepts of these traditions are analyzed in light of the studied passages and compared with modern non-anthropocentric approaches to animal ethics. The approach of comparison and contrast between the traditions enables the researcher to highlight both differences (e.g., Jain absolutism versus Buddhist pragmatism and Hindu dharma) and similarities (e.g., karmic interdependence and compassion). The main themes are identified through close reading of the selected texts and by analyzing and synthesizing the different approaches of the three studied traditions in order to develop an original framework, referred to as the “Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing”.

The study is restricted to textual analysis. Although hermeneutics recognizes that there are differences within every tradition as to how to interpret it at any given time in its history, there is no ethnography of practice here. To establish a new theory useful in the field of animal ethics, this study can serve as a foundation for further empirical research and its applications.

Jainism: Ahimsa as Absolute and the Equality of Souls

Ahimsa (nonviolence) is not an ethical code but the highest ethical rule (ahimsa paramo dharma), which is the foundation of spiritual practice and perspective in Jainism. This total respect for non-harm has deep philosophical roots, which underpin the principle of equality for all forms of life.

Key to the Jain metaphysics is the notion of jīva (soul or sentient essence), present in all living beings, human, animal, plant, and microscopic organisms. Every jīva has the ability to possess consciousness, perception, and the innate power of infinite knowledge, bliss, and liberation (moksha). This soul equality cuts across species lines, so that the differences between humans and nonhumans are not ethically relevant (Tattvārtha Sūtra, 2.1-2.15; Vallely, 2018). This is supplemented by anekantavada (the doctrine of many-sidedness or non-absolutism), which promotes more poly-faceted views and humility in judgment, which helps to tolerate and minimize dogmatic harm. Asceticism has five major vows (mahavratas), which include ahimsa (nonviolence), satya (truthfulness), asteya (non-stealing), brahmacharya (celibacy/chastity), and

aparigraha (non-possession), organising daily life with ahimsa being the primary vow permeating all the others (Tattvārtha Sūtra, 7.1-7.6).

Jain ethical conduct is very much characterized by extreme vigilance against harm. Devout laypeople and monks do not harm even those possessing one sense (ekendriya), including microorganisms, by sweeping out paths with a soft broom (rajoharana) and by adding a mouth covering (mukhavastra) to avoid unintentionally inhaling or exhaling them. Strict vegetarianism, which often goes as far as veganism, is obligatory since eating animal products or causing harm to plants leads to negative karma. Ascetics avoid root vegetables because they have a greater potential to disrupt life. This is due to the acknowledgement that all creatures are afraid of death and desire life, as it was discussed in ancient literature: the idea is that all breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures are not to be killed, not to be treated violently, abused, and tortured (Acaranga Sūtra, 1.1.6; Jacobi, 1884/translated edition).

These teachings are based on the primary sources such as the Acaranga Sūtra (one of the oldest canonical texts) which describes the behaviour of monks and strictly bans any harm that should be done to animals and microscopic life; the Tattvārtha Sūtra (the systematic exposition of Jain doctrine by Umāsvāti), which categorises souls by their sensory abilities and clearly states that such souls are equal despite these differences; and the Ratnakaranda Sravakacara (the guide for lay ethics by Samantabhadra), which outlines vows and practices emphasizing compassion toward all beings (Tattvārtha Sūtra; Ācārāṅga Sūtra).

In addition to ahimsa, animal ethics in Jainism is grounded in the principle of soul equality, which holds that injuring any jīva attaches karmic particles to the soul, hindering liberation. The animals, like human beings, are karmic beings who can be reborn and eventually achieve moksha; therefore, their protection is part of spiritual evolution. Ascetic self-control, renunciation of possessions, desires, and exploitation, is a way of getting moksha and cleansing the soul of karmic bondage. The aparigraha (non-possession) vow has far-reaching ecological consequences: minimalism and interdependence through consumption reduction, habitat destruction, and indirect destruction of animals (parasparopagraho jīvānām-"souls render service to one another") (Tattvārtha Sūtra, 5.21; Chapple, 2002).

Modern Jain animal ethics and animal sustainability are still alive. Jains have traditional panjrapoles (animal shelters) throughout India, where animals are cared for without exploitation, whether they are injured or abandoned. Contemporary efforts, including the Luvin Arms Animal

Sanctuary, Colorado (based on Jain doctrine), offer life to farmed animals, following ahimsa in non-religious settings. Jain philosophers and social movements promote veganism and environmentalism through a practice known as aparigraha, and sustainability, and these worldviews have shaped how the world discusses animal rights and environmentalism (Lombardi, 2025; Arihanta Institute, 2025). These attempts show the continued relevance of Jainism, with its strict guidelines for coexisting in a spirit of compassion amid ecological catastrophe.

Buddhism: Compassion, Rebirth, and Pragmatic Non-Harm

Ahimsa (nonviolence) is a Buddhist principle consistent with the broader ethical principle of reducing the suffering (duhkha) of all sentient beings. However, it is practiced pragmatically as part of the core teachings rather than as an absolute principle. The Four Noble Truths identify suffering as a part of existence, craving as the cause of suffering, state that suffering can end, and recommend the Eightfold Path, right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration, as the path to liberation. This way takes the ethical conduct (sila) further to non-harm, where the loving-kindness (mettā) and compassion (karunā) are developed in practices such as the mettā sutta, where the goodwill is radiated to every being, with no exception; human beings, animals, and even gods (Dhammapada, verses 129-130; Finnigan, 2017).

Buddhist animal philosophy focuses on the sentience and common susceptibility to dukkha. No natural ontological hierarchical state of being that lacks moral consideration exists; animals are sentient (sattva) to the extent that they can experience pain, fear, and desire. The concept of reincarnation (samsara) is that species of species recycle themselves according to karma, including the animal realm (*tiracchanayoni*), i.e., any animal might have been a former relative, mother, or friend. This makes it sympathetic: "All tremble at violence; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill" (Dhammapada, 129). Animals endure excruciating torture, which includes predation, exploitation, and lack of knowledge, and therefore, their world is even more of dukkha than the human world (Valpey, 2004).

Ways and differences are contextual flexibility. In Theravada Buddhism (the most common in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar), monks have a version of the "threefold purity" rule: meat is permissible if it is not seen, heard, or suspected to have been killed specifically for the eater

(Jivaka Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya 55). This endorses alms-round pragmatism, but does not oblige vegetarianism. Mahayana traditions (China, Korea, Vietnam, Tibet), by contrast, are much stricter in vegetarianism, and meat-eating is considered to be inconsistent with compassion and bodhisattva vows. It is sometimes prohibited by monastic codes (Finnigan, 2017; Nigam & Chandra, 2026).

These views are depicted using primary texts. The Dhammapada emphasizes universal non-harm and sympathy for fearful creatures. The stories of the Buddha in the Jātaka -past lives- portray the Buddha as an animal with the virtues of kindness and self-sacrifice, which humanizes animals and criticizes cruelty. The Lankavatara Sūtra (Mahayana) is a fierce reproach of meat-eating: "To the love of purity, the Bodhisattva... does not eat any meat, and this is because it causes the beings to have fear and to violate compassion (Nigam & Chandra, 2026).

In addition to ahimsa, Buddhist animal ethics are found in the mindfulness of interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda), in which all phenomena are conditionally presented, and in which enslaving humans and animals in causal webs — har — ng one harms the entire system. Ethical development through bodhicitta (enlightened mind) in Mahayana inspires bodhisattvas to fulfill their duties to liberate everyone, including animals, from suffering. Buddhism decries the practice of animal sacrifice (that was prevalent in Vedic regions) as one that brings about bad karma and hinders enlightenment (Finnigan, 2017).

Asian animal welfare movements are manifested in modern interpretations. The revival of Buddhism in China also drives vegetarian restaurants, animal release (fangsheng) activities, and sanctuaries; societies propagate husheng (protecting life) in the context of environmental issues. Anti-cruelty laws and vegetarianism are promoted in lay and monastic activity in Sri Lanka and Thailand. Compassionate Tibetan leaders such as the 17th Karmapa espouse vegetarianism. These activities combine tradition with modern veganism and ecology, where animal protection is considered part of alleviating dukkha worldwide (Tarocco, 2023; Shambhala, 2023).

Hindu Thought: Contextual Ahimsa, Dharma, and Sacred Ecology

Ahimsa (nonviolence) is an ethical principle based on dharma (duty/righteousness) in Hindu thought, and it evolves over time, taking various forms in its treatment of animals. Hinduism has pragmatized situational ethics, combined with sacred symbolism and cosmic interdependence, whereas in other religions, such as Jainism and Buddhism, ethics are either absolute or pragmatic.

Animal ethics has evolved since the Vedic era (c. 1500-500 BCE) up to the post-Vedic era. Animal sacrifice (*pasubandha*) is described in early Vedic texts (such as the *Rigveda*) as part of a ritual honoring a deity, and cattle (*go*) are particularly useful in agriculture, milk, and sacrifice (e.g., hymns praise cows but allow the sacrifice; Dickstein, 2022). Both the *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* contain allusions to animal sacrifice, which is evidence of a worldview that holds sacrificial killing as a way of keeping the cosmos in order. Nevertheless, changes in the *Upanisads* (c. 800-300 BCE) and epics take place after Vedic times, which signifies the shift to a more conducive approach to *ahimsa*. It is a virtue of non-harm to all beings (*sarva-bhuta-ahimsa*) that helps people escape the rebirth cycles, and the *Chāndogya Upanisad* encourages not harming any being, criticizes unnecessary violence, and correlates the right moral behaviour with the ability to avoid rebirth (*Chāndogya Upanisad* 3.17.4; PMC, 2020). This development indicates the spread of *sramana* (Jainism and Buddhism), agricultural stabilization, decreased slaughter at rites, and increased compassion.

The major idea is that the *dharma* is a matter of contextual obligation, which depends on caste (*varna*), stage of life (*asrama*), and circumstance, rather than absolutism. Reincarnation (*samsara*) assumes continuity between man and animal through *karma*, hierarchies between species are blurred, and they are all given the same moral position. Animals, especially the cow (*go*), are associated with maternal care, the earth (*bhumi*), and the provision of the deities; cow protection (*go-raksa*) symbolizes moral worship. Such avatars as *Varaha* (boar) and *Krishna* (cowherd) are divine-human-animal interdependent, and *Krishna* as *Gopala* (cows' nurturer) strengthens reverence (Krishna, 2010; Valpey, 2020).

Customs are different: *Vaisnavism* and some Brahmin caste practices consider meat, and more so beef, to be impure or violent, whereas other religions may use fish or poultry within the *dharma* context. The *Bhagavad Gītā* presents arguments in which *Krishna* encourages *sattvic* (pure) foods, including vegetarian foods that enhance clarity, over *rajasic* or *tamasic* foods, although it does not universally enforce vegetarianism (*Bhagavad Gītā* 17.8-10). The *Manu Smṛti* (*Dharmasastra*) allows meat for religious purposes but cautions against unnecessary harm; meat-eating is punished by *karma* and recommends moderation (*Manu Smṛti* 5.48-56; arguments about exceptions and perfect non-harm).

The *Rigveda* (sacrificial hymns), *Chāndogya Upanisad* (ethical non-harm), *Bhagavad Gītā* (dietary ethics in *dharma-yoga*), the *Dharmasastras* (e.g., *Manu Smṛti* on lawful/ritual allowances), and

Puranas (e.g., Bhagavata Purana in praise of cow protection and animal-deity relationships) are the texts most discussed as primary sources.

In addition to ahimsa, Hindu animal ethics is also the cosmic order (rta), described as the natural law that promotes harmony between beings. Prakriti (nature/matter) is divine energy, and is dependent upon purusa (spirit); humans and animals are a part of this web, and the exploitation of nature throws the balance off, preventing moksha (liberation). The dependence of humans and animals facilitates spiritual development - caring for animals cleanses karma and upholds dharma - and ecological holism, in which respect for nature (Prakriti as goddess) leads to sustainability (Dwivedi, as cited in many sources; Valpey, 2020).

These foundations are utilized by modern Hindu revivals, including Mahatma Gandhi, who connected ahimsa with animal rights. Gandhi regarded cow protection as a symbol of caring for the helpless; he applied nonviolence to animal abuse, meat consumption, and vivisection, and he evaluated the morality of society through animal treatment, thereby influencing animal welfare laws and movements in India (Jena, 2017). Modern activism includes cow sanctuaries (gausalas), anti-cruelty activism, and eco-theology, which combines ancient veneration with eco-preservation.

Comparative Analysis: Similarities, Differences, and “Beyond Ahimsa”

The Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions have a strong moral commitment to ahimsa (nonviolence) toward animals, but they differ in their interpretations, scope, and philosophical extrapolations. This comparative study identifies similarities, major differences, nonviolence transcendence, and still-existing scholarly controversies.

Similarities are the continuity of karma between animals and humans, the denial of unnecessary cruelty, and the impact on vegetarian cultures. The three traditions all attest to the reality of rebirth (samsara), in which souls or consciousnesses pass through species due to karma, erasing strict human-animal distinctions (Kemmerer, 2012). Animals are living creatures that suffer, and they need to be protected against the ill effects of negative karma. This mutual disapproval of unnecessary violence has led to the common practice of vegetarianism, which is strict in Jainism, promoted in Buddhism, and observed in some branches of Hinduism, due to sympathy and interdependence (Caruana, 2020). These concepts have influenced animal welfare trends and ethical vegetarianism movements in South Asia.

The use of ahimsa and its extent are divergent. Jainism is an absolutist religion, prioritizing nonviolence (ahimsa paramo dharma) above all forms of life (including microorganisms), without exception, even in cases of self-defense, in extreme versions (Vallely, 2018). Buddhism is an approach of middle-way pragmatism, with a focus on intention and compassion (karunā) rather than strict rules; the practice of the threefold purity permits the consumption of meat as long as the intention is not to harm the consumer, but to develop the mind instead (Finnigan, 2017). Situational ethics in Hinduism are informed by the presence of dharma (contextual duty), allowing exceptions to rituals, caste, or necessity in Vedic times, but post-Vedic changes encourage greater non-harm (Krishna, 2010; Valpey, 2020). Scope differs: Jainism includes microscopic life (ekendriya beings), Buddhism includes sentient beings (sattva) that can suffer, and Hinduism usually includes symbolic reverence (e.g., sacred cows as representations of Prakriti) and practical allowances (Caruana, 2020).

These frameworks are enhanced by philosophical extensions outside ahimsa. Jain soul-based egalitarianism holds that there is an intrinsic equality of jīva (souls) among species, with harming any binding karma and hindering moksha; aparigraha (non-possession) means ecological restraint (Chapple, 2002). Buddhism's compassion-based mindfulness is grounded in pratīyasamutpāda (dependent arising), which fosters bodhicitta (an enlightened mind) so that all beings can be liberated from dukkha, and it criticizes exploitation through ethical awareness (Finnigan, 2017). Ecological holism based on Hindu dharma incorporates rta (cosmic order), Prakriti (nature as divine), and interdependent living between humans and animals as the key to harmony and spiritual development, and cow care as the symbol of stewardship (Valpey, 2020). These dimensions will go beyond avoidance of harm, providing positive obligations: soul purification (Jain), compassionate liberation (Buddhist), and cosmic balance (Hindu).

Academic discussions dispute whether these traditions aid the contemporary language of animal rights or are anthropocentric. It is argued that they are consistent with rights through karma-rebirth equality, and the non-anthropocentric reasons are more powerful than utilitarianism in the West (Adamson, 2023; Kemmerer, 2012). Others observe that anthropocentrism has not yet been eliminated; humans are born with greater liberation potential, and responsibilities tend to fulfil human spiritual ambitions rather than animal rights as such (Caruana, 2020). Jain absolutism seems most in tune with rights-based perspectives, but even then, preservation is based on self-interest and karma. Buddhism, pragmatism, and Hindu contextualism oppose the right of universalism, where situational ethics take precedence over the right to the abstract. The

modern literature mediates these to global discourses, in which interfaith animal welfare has potential, but Indic ideas should not be overlaid with Western ideas (Valpey, 2020).

The comparative analysis of animal ethics in Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions reveals both profound convergences and instructive divergences. Rather than treating these traditions as isolated repositories of *ahiṃsā*, this section advances a sustained argument: Indic philosophies collectively articulate an interdependent, karmic non-anthropocentrism that surpasses dominant Western frameworks—such as rights-based individualism (Regan, 1983) or sentience-focused utilitarianism (Singer, 1975)—in addressing systemic exploitation. By integrating karmic continuity, relational compassion, and cosmic stewardship, these traditions position animals as co-participants in moral and ecological webs, offering practical and spiritual resources for contemporary crises like factory farming and biodiversity loss. This analysis operationalizes the “Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing” framework introduced earlier.

Table 1: Key Concepts in Indic Animal Ethics

Tradition	Moral Standing	Scope of Ahiṃsā	Positive Obligations Beyond Harm
Jainism	Soul (<i>jīva</i>) egalitarianism	Absolutist (incl. microbes)	Karmic reciprocity + <i>aparigraha</i> minimalism
Buddhism	Shared sentience & <i>duḥkha</i>	Pragmatic/intentional	Compassionate liberation via <i>bodhicitta</i> & interdependence
Hinduism	Symbolic/cosmic (<i>prakṛti</i>)	Contextual/dharmic	Stewardship through <i>ṛta</i> & <i>go-rakṣā</i>

Table 2: Modern Implications for Systemic Exploitation

Framework	Strength for Contemporary Issues	Contribution to Relational Ethics of Flourishing
Western Rights/Utilitarian	Focus on individual interests/suffering	Limited systemic/ecological integration
Indic Relational	Karmic interdependence + positive duties	Holistic response to factory farming & climate

Overall, *ahimsa* brings these traditions together by rejecting gratuitous harm. However, their extensions, egalitarianism, mindfulness, and holism, offer the resources of animal ethics, which are used to inform modern veganism, ecology, and rights action.

Contemporary Relevance and Applications

The Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing offers distinctive resources for contemporary animal ethics by transcending the limitations of dominant Western frameworks. Unlike Tom Regan’s

rights-based approach, which emphasizes inherent value and subject-of-a-life criteria but often lacks deep motivational or spiritual grounding (Regan, 1983), Indic traditions provide karmic reciprocity and rebirth empathy. The Jain principle of *jīva* equality and *parasparopagraho jīvānām* fosters intrinsic species egalitarianism, motivating protection through long-term spiritual consequences rather than abstract rights alone.

Ethical theories of *ahimsa* and veganism, along with the Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu versions, continue to have a profound impact on global animal protection, veganism, and environmental ethics activism. These ancient principles form the basis of important animal welfare legislation in India. Article 51A(g) of the Constitution, inserted in 1976, requires its citizens to conserve and enrich the natural environment and to be compassionate toward living creatures, citing the Indic tradition of nonviolence (Tarabout, 2019). This has guided legislations like the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1960), Wildlife Protection Act (1972), and state-level prohibitions on cow slaughter as a legacy of *ahimsa* that focuses on compassion over exploitation (Krishna, 2022). These concepts are inspiring veganism and interfaith environmental ethics, in which Jain strict vegetarianism, Buddhist compassion, and Hindu respect for sacred animals drive plant-based lifestyles and environmental care in response to climate catastrophes (Kemmerer, 2012).

Nevertheless, contemporary problems undermine the uniformity of use. The rapid industrialization and urbanization processes have led to increased factory farming, the exploitation of dairy products, and habitat destruction, which conflict with traditional non-harm ideals (Chakraborty, 2017). There are also cultural adaptations: with vegetarianism continuing within a variety of communities, the force of economic globalization has pushed toward the use of meat, which contradicts the apparent ethics and behaviours. Criticism has focused on hypocrisy, e.g., ritual exceptions or selective reverence (cows but not other animals), and vigilante violence in cow protection movements, sometimes sacrificing the real welfare to cultural symbolism (Human Rights Watch, 2019). These tensions show how *ahimsa* resists the commodification of a market-focused world.

Nevertheless, these traditions can make significant contributions to policy and philosophical discussion despite challenges. They offer guidelines for anti-cruelty legislation that emphasize compassion and interdependence, which may enhance the implementation of existing laws or lead to new statutes on biodiversity protection. Indic perspectives can be added to Western animal ethics (utilitarianism) and rights-based animal ethics (focus on the inherent value of subjects-of-a-life) to provide non-anthropocentric concepts of liberation across species,

emphasizing karmic continuity, soul equality, and ecological holism (Adamson, 2023; Finnigan, 2017).

Practical applications are presented in case studies. Jain-based panjrapoles (animal shelters) continue to operate in India, sheltering thousands of strays, injured, or old animals (e.g., the Bombay Panjrapole since 1834) as an expression of absolute ahimsa by providing lifelong refuge and never exploiting any animals (Arihanta Institute, 2024). In Asia (e.g., in China and Nepal), Buddhist monasteries rescue abandoned pets and promote veganism; among them is the temple of Ven. Zhi Xian, where thousands of cats and dogs live, and projects like Animal Liberation Sanctuaries in the area of Kopan Monastery (Buddhistdoor, 2021). Hindu cow-protection movements, such as gausalas and contemporary revolutions in the Gandhi tradition, promote the sanctuary approach and anti-slaughter legislation, albeit some have been accused of being politicized (Valpey, 2020).

The Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing can enrich environmental justice, One Health initiatives, and decolonial ethics by offering non-anthropocentric tools for biodiversity conservation, sustainable food systems, and interfaith dialogue on climate action. Integrating these perspectives into global policy and education can counter industrial exploitation with interdependent, spiritually motivated care.

These illustrations show how Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu animal ethics have long remained relevant, not forgotten, as they have adjusted ancient wisdom to modern crises and contributed to the creation of compassion in the world (Ranganathan, n.d.).

Conclusion

The discussion of animal ethics in the Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions underscores the great moral and spiritual importance placed on the lives of nonhumans in Indian philosophy. The main element in this discussion is the idea of ahimsa, or nonviolence, which emerges as a strand in all of these traditions, yet is interpreted and put into practice in different ways. In Jainism, ahimsa is held as the highest ethical ideal, and this abstinence from harming is required even toward the smallest living being. Though Buddhism is also devoted to compassion (*prācāya*) and non-harm, animal ethics is situated within the broader context of the Eightfold Path and the development of mindfulness, as all sentient beings depend on one another. Animal ethics are incorporated into Hindu thought as varied and stratified by dharma, karma, and respect for sacred animals, balancing ritual, symbolic, and ecological aspects.

All these traditions, combined, express a vision of moral obligation that goes beyond human-centered morality. They challenge us to acknowledge animals not only as resources but as members of the moral world, who warrant care, respect, and protection. Notably, such views also echo modern arguments on ecological sustainability, animal rights, and environmental justice. In the age of industrial exploitation and ecological crisis, the Indian tradition of ahimsa and compassion is a counter-narrative of restraint, reverence, and interconnectedness.

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