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Speak Up

RETHINKING LIVELIHOODS THROUGH THE LENS OF NONVIOLENCE – A JAIN PERSPECTIVE ON THE FIFTEEN KARMĀDĀNAS

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In today's world, where our choices shape both society and the environment, Jain philosophy offers a unique lens for reflection. One important idea is *karmādāna*—occupations that bind the soul with heavy karmas because they involve violence, exploitation, or harm to living beings.

The Jain texts remind householders to avoid not only these professions but also the act of supporting or approving them. This threefold restraint—not doing, not inspiring, and not endorsing—is central to living ethically.

What are the Karmādānas?

The term *karmādāna* combines *karma* and *ādān* (acquisition), referring to professions that bind the soul with intense karmas. These karmas arise from activities involving violence, exploitation, or harm to living beings. Jain texts urge householders not only to avoid such professions, but also to refrain from encouraging or endorsing them. This triple restraint, action, inspiration, and approval, is central to Jain ethical living.

Each *karmādāna* represents a livelihood that, in some way, contradicts the Jain commitment to compassion and restraint:

1. **Charcoal Work (Aṅgāra-Karma):** Burning kilns and furnaces consume immense fire, destroying countless fire-bodied beings. Violence here is subtle but widespread.



2. **Forest Work (Vana-Karma):** Cutting trees or clearing land uproots plant life and disturbs invisible organisms. It is violence against vegetation and habitats.
3. **Cart-Making and Vehicle Manufacturing (Śakaṭa-Karma):** Carts and vehicles are products of industrial manufacturing. Industrial production frequently pollutes the air, water, and soil, thereby damaging ecosystems. Ecological destruction itself is a form of violence.
4. **Animal Leasing (Bhāṭī-Karma):** Renting animals for labor or transport commodifies sentient beings, exposing them to cruelty and exploitation.
5. **Excavation Work (Sphoṭana-Karma):** Mining and quarrying tear into the earth, disturbing earth-bodied life and displacing entire ecosystems.
6. **Ivory and Leather Trade (Danta-Vāṇijya):** Direct killing of animals for tusks, hides, or bones—violence is explicit and unavoidable.
7. **Lac Trade (Lākṣā-Vāṇijya):** Extracting lac involves killing countless insects. Violence here is small-scale but massive in number.
8. **Liquor Trade (Rasa-Vāṇijya):** The trade in liquor and other intoxicants entails the destruction of countless living organisms. Such harm is not incidental but woven into the very fabric of the system. Violence, therefore, manifests as systemic and pervasive.
9. **Weapons and Poisons Trade (Viṣa-Vāṇijya):** The making of poisons and manufacture destructive weapons facilitates killing and injury. Violence manifests not only in their direct use but also in their indirect supply. Thus, harm is perpetuated both through action and through the systems that enable it.
10. **Living Beings Trade (Keśa-Vāṇijya):** Buying and selling animals or humans—reduce life to property. Violence is against dignity and freedom.
11. **Mechanical Extraction (Yantrapīḍana-Karma):** Oil presses and crushers destroy subtle-bodied organisms. Violence is hidden but real.
12. **Animal Mutilation (Nirlāñchana-Karma):** Branding, castration, or mutilation inflict direct physical pain and suffering. Violence is overt.



13. **Forest Burning (Dāvāgni-Karma):** Setting fire to forests kills countless beings in one act—plants, animals, and subtle organisms.
14. **Water Body Drying (Sarhrada-Jalāśaya-Śoṣaṇa):** Removing or draining lakes and ponds destroys aquatic as well as water-bodies life and disrupts ecological balance.
15. **Immoral Patronage (Asatī-Jana-Poṣaṇa):** Supporting prostitution or animal entertainment degrades human dignity and subjects animals to violence for amusement.

Why it Matters Today?

In the Jain tradition, these *karmādāna* are not just ancient rules. They are ethical signposts found in canonical texts like the *Bhagavatī Sūtra*, *Upāsakadaśā*, and *Āvaśyaka Sūtra* and are elaborated by their eminent commentators and prominent thinkers like Ācārya Haribhadra. But their relevance extends beyond scripture.

In our interconnected economy, every choice, whether in business, consumption, or investment, ripples across ecosystems and communities. The *karmādāna* framework asks us:

- Is my livelihood aligned with compassion?
- Am I complicit in systems that harm life, even indirectly?

This is not about rigid renunciation. It's about awareness, intention, and transformation. Jainism encourages progress. Each *karmādāna* is not just a occupation, it is a channel of violence against one or more forms of life: earth, water, fire, plants, animals, or humans. Jain ethics teaches that even indirect involvement—through approval or encouragement—creates karmic bondage. By reflecting on these occupations, we see how livelihoods can either sustain life or destroy it. Choosing nonviolent work is a step toward compassion, harmony, and spiritual progress.
