

# Celebrating DIVERSITY

Dr Atul K. Shah comments on eco-living from the Jain perspective

**E**thical living is not a new idea. Neither is respect for the environment or living a healthy life, free of chemicals and toxins. In fact, for some cultures, this was at the core of their philosophy for thousands of years. Buddhists, Hindus and Jains would be excellent examples of these cultures which have originated from the soul of ancient India. There is very little violence in their history, and animals and nature were protected and revered. By experiencing and studying these cultures, we can enrich our lives and those around us. I speak from experience as I was fortunate to be born and raised in the Jain tradition. However, having lived in the UK for more than half of my life, I have had to go through all the anxiety of 'fitting in' to the British way of living. It was in the process of doing this that I actually discovered how it was my very own culture which had such deep insights for ethical living. It explains what it means to be happy and truly free. It speaks of caring for each and every living being, without exploiting anyone. This philosophy is so timely and relevant, that I have now dedicated myself to teaching and promoting its beautiful ethics. I like to believe that the whole of Britain will benefit from its wisdom and I am not talking about conversion, but about knowledge and the time-tested philosophy of peaceful co-existence.

## WHAT ARE JAINS ALL ABOUT?

So what, you may ask, is the Jain tradition? It is not a religion in the 'Christian' sense – where there is often a hierarchy of priests who act as middlemen, where there is one bible and only one true God, and where people often have to follow and observe without questioning. It is certainly a spiritual tradition, but rooted in a deep philosophy of truthful living and thinking. The Jain tradition is very creative and artistic, with some of the most beautiful temples and sculptures in the entire world, and a strong

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story-telling tradition, rich with characters and diversity. It is very plural in its approach to truth, showing that there are multiple truths that can live side-by-side with one another without necessarily having one right answer (anekant). Mahatma Gandhi was strongly influenced by the Jain philosophy of Ahimsa or Respect for all Life and practiced this throughout his life to great personal and public success.

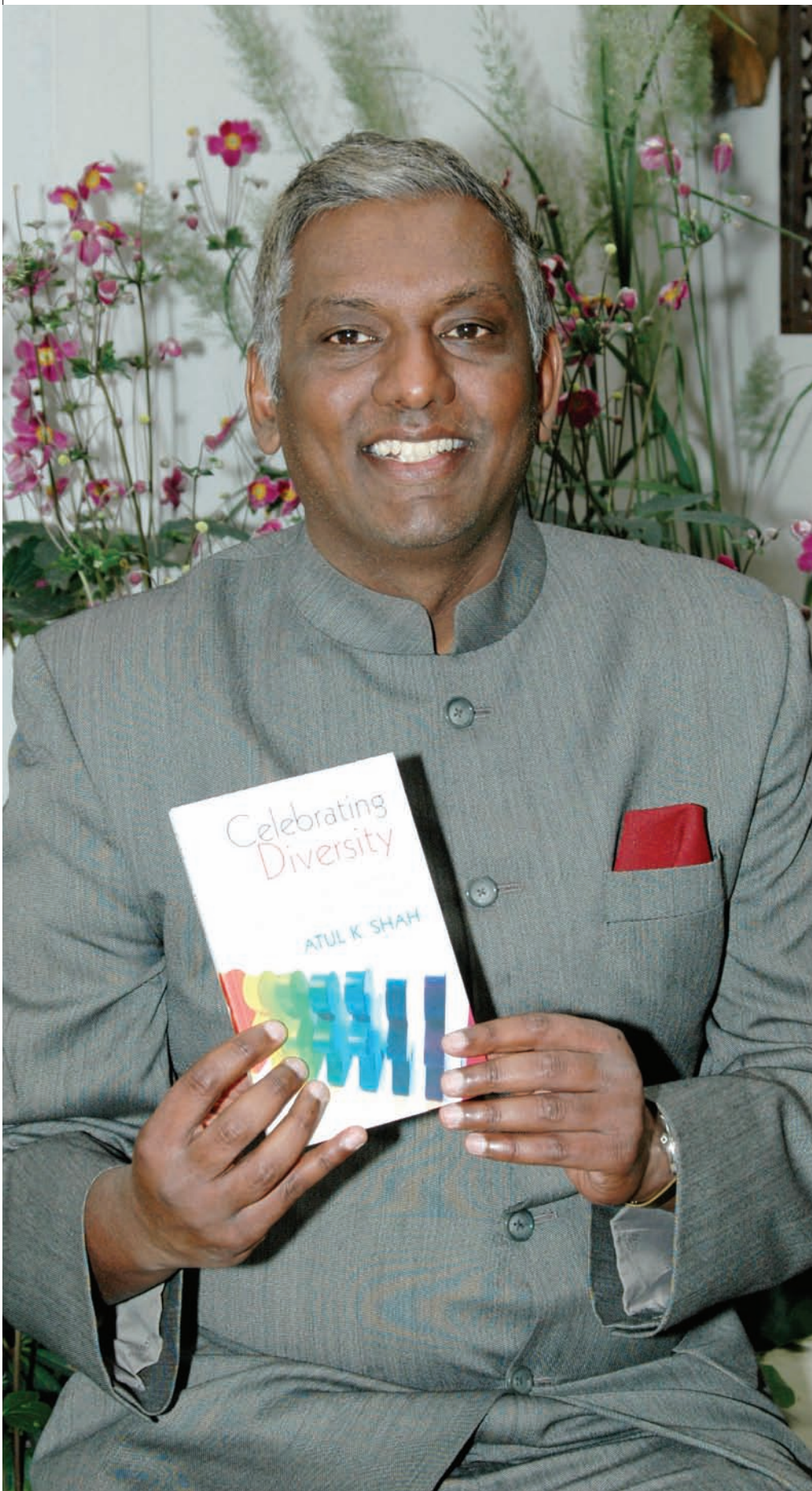
Jains believe in the interdependence of all life – *parasparopagraho jivanam*. All living beings are inter-connected in the web of life, and the role of the human is to be a trustee of the planet and to guard it with care and compassion. Human intelligence should be used not to exploit or uproot, but to nurture and support. *Aparigraha* explains that lasting happiness can never come from material possessions. We are advised to take care not to become attached to our material goods – homes, cars, clothes, holidays – but instead

to focus on living a rich inner life, where we are creative and giving without any expectation of return. Nature gives unconditionally to us, so we should learn from it and respect it as a teacher. The principle of *Satya* places a high importance on truthful living and practicing before preaching. If Jains look at the mirror, they are supposed not to admire their own outer beauty but instead examine their inner weaknesses and imperfections, and work on improving upon

them so that they become responsible citizens of the planet and the universe.

## A BORDERLESS MIND

In spite of having such a rich culture, I constantly have to explain myself or defend my views. Why am I a vegetarian? Why do I speak about my religious views to businesses and organisations? Why is it that some cultures are more open-minded and diverse than others? Shouldn't anyone who comes to live in Britain 'fit in' to the British way of life and behave in a British way? Rather than answering these questions, I try to show the beauty of simplicity, creative living, the healing power of a peaceful mind and heart, the influence diet and health have on our thinking and perceptions of others and the richness of open-mindedness. Instead of fitting in, I suggest we could 'fit out' more to the different cultures of the world so that we have a 'borderless mind'. We could care for the planet without becoming its master, through



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humility and awe. We humans are so arrogant; we feel we are the only species who can save this planet – even after we have destroyed it! We are responsible for the damage and unless we change our thinking and our mindset, we will never bring about positive change. For me, carbon offsetting is a ‘new nonsense’, manufactured by those who want to profit from the planet. Like many things, it has the pretence of caring – when we should try to be living authentically, not just pretending.

### **BEYOND PREJUDICE**

I am grateful to have inherited a holistic way of looking at things – where every issue is seen in its wider context, not just the narrow symptom or cure. I feel this is our problem today – that we have compartmentalised problems and dissected them to such an extent we cannot see the big picture at all. Experts profit from specialisation, but increasingly know more and more about less and less. It’s good to ask ourselves if our view of other cultures is arrogant and racist. If we think we have invented a new way of ethical living, we do not really understand our global heritage and the beauty of diverse cultures. If we work to connect our new formulas to ancient wisdom, we are likely to make our own changes in thinking and attitudes last much longer. War begins at home, but so does peace. ■

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