
UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO JAINISM

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

Jainism is one of the oldest religious traditions of the world. A great generation of *tirthankaras*, *acaryas*, saints, and scholars belonged to this tradition. In today's world, there is an assumption that religion loses its grip on humanity, but Jainism has lot to offer to negate this contention. The main objective of this paper is to achieve a complete understanding of this tradition. Jainism takes the path of self reliance, self discipline, and self purification to realize the inherent potentialities of the human self. It is also a focus on the history, and the sublime and dynamic religiosity of Jainism.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Jainism is one of the religions whose origin can be traced back to the twenty four teachers (*tirthankaras* - ones who establishes a path or ford), through whom their faith is believed to have been handed down. The term '*jaina*' is derived from the term '*jina*', and the term '*jina*' is the common name for the supreme souls who are totally free from all feelings of attachment, aversion, etc. The etymological meaning of the word '*jina*' is conqueror. It is the common name given to the twenty four teachers (*tirthankaras*), because they have conquered all passions (*raga* and *dvesa*) and have attained liberation. Jainism in its essence is the religion of heroic souls who are *jinās* or conquerors of their self. The devotees of *jina* are called '*jaina*', and the religion propounded by *jina* is called the '*Jaina Religion*.'

The first of these teachers was Rsabhadeva and the last was Vardhamana, also known as *Mahavira* (the Great Hero). He is said to have lived in the sixth

century B.C. as a contemporary of Gautama Buddha. Mahavira is the successor of Parvanatha, who lived in the ninth century B.C. The contribution of Jainism to Indian culture, spirituality, and philosophy is really immense. It is a religion of praxis than of faith. Jainism is a *sramanic* religion. The word 'Sramana' means an ascetic or a monk. Thus asceticism and mysticism, meditation and contemplation, silence and solitude, practice of virtues like non-violence, renunciation, celibacy, self-control, etc. are distinguishing characteristics of this tradition. Jainism was also instrumental for a radical change in the social life of Indians. Jainism has the universal message of non-violence.

1.2 ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF JAINISM

The advent of Jainism in the sixth century BC was expected, as many people were beginning to oppose the hierarchical organization and formalized ritualism of the Vedic religion. The failure of the Vedic religion to meet popular needs, the meaningless forms of sacrifices which did not provide release from *samsara*, and the merciless killing of animals in the sacrificial context forced the *Jinas* to provide the people with a new orientation and new interpretation. Their teachings laid primary emphasis on personal training, and taught that salvation is attainable to anyone willing to learn it. They stressed on personal effort and practice, not theoretical speculation, and proof of their validity was found in personal experience, not textual authority or logical argument. Jains hold the view that the *Jaina* religion is eternal and has been revealed again and again in the succeeding periods of the world by innumerable *Tirthanakaras*. It is believed that all the *Tirthankaras* reached *moksa* at the time of their death, as a result of their personal effort; they are regarded as 'Gods' and are worshipped by the Jains. Jains believe that it is on the authority of the teachings of the omniscient liberated saints (*Jinas* or *Tirthankaras*) that we can have real knowledge about certain spiritual matters. The teachings and lives of the saints show the possibility and path to attain liberation. The twenty-third *tirthankara*, the immediate predecessor of Mahavira, was Parvanatha, and he preached the doctrine of love and ahimsa. He enjoined four vows, which are, (i) Not to destroy life (*ahimsa*) (ii) Not to lie (*satya*) (iii) Not to steal (*asteya*) and (iv) Not to own property (*aparigraha*). His great successor Mahavira added the fifth vow of chastity (*brahmacarya*).

1.3 MAHAVIRA

Mahavira was the twenty-fourth *tirthankara*. Jainism is closely associated with Vardhamana Mahavira, who lived from 540 to 468 B.C. and established the central doctrines of Jainism. He was born in Northern India, in the town of Vyshali, into a royal family. His father was Siddhartha Maharaja who ruled Kundapura, and his mother was Priyakarini. Vardhamana lived as a householder for thirty years. At the age of thirty he left his wife, child, and family and started a life of total renunciation and asceticism. Mahavira passed twelve years of his ascetic life with equanimity, performing hard and long penances, and enduring all afflictions and calamities with an undisturbed mind. At the end, the ascetic obtained omniscience; he became *jina*, the victorious and *Mahavira*, the great hero.

He realized his true self and attained omniscience by practising rigorous austerities and penances. He understood the nature of physical bondage and ways of

achieving total liberation from bondage, and thus, liberation from rebirth and bodily existence. The ideal state of freedom can be achieved only through a radical ascetical life, the essence of which is total renunciation of all bodily comforts and all material objects. He says, “It is owing to attachment that a person commits violence, utters lies, commits theft, indulges in sex, and develops a yearning for unlimited hoarding.” (*Bhakta-parijna*). Modern Jains believe that his message is full of pragmatic optimism, self-reliance, self-discipline, and self-purification to develop the inherent and infinite potentialities of the human self. A glimpse into his life shows that he was an embodiment of non-violence and compassion. He taught five great vows and initiated many people into this way of life, established the four fold order, (monks, nuns, male lay-votaries and female votaries.) and emerged a teacher of many monks, a renowned preacher, and a founder of a new religion. Lord Mahavira passed the last thirty years of his life as the omniscient *tirthankara*. By the time of his death at the age of seventy-two, a large group of people embraced this new faith. Mahavira’s close disciples led the movement after his death, and Jainism spread from the north-east of India to the north-west and even to the south, especially to the present day state of Karnataka.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Who is a *tirthankara*? Why are they called so?

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2) What is the core teaching of the *tirthankaras*?

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3) What is the main contribution of Vardhamana Mahavira to Jainism?

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1.4 SACRED SCRIPTURES OF JAINISM

There are various opinions with regard to the classification of Jaina texts. Each of the main sects of Jainism recognizes its own body of sacred scriptures though many texts are common to all. Most of the ancient Jain texts are written in *Prakṛta* (an early form of Sanskrit). According to their own tradition, the canon (as we know it today) was agreed upon almost a thousand years after the death of Mahavira, in the late fifth or early sixth century of the Christian era, at a Council held at Vallabhi in Gujarat, presided over by the famous monk Devarddhi Ksamasramana, who was called for the specific purpose of collecting and putting the sacred texts into written form.

The general outline of the canon is as follows. It is divided into six sections and contains either forty-five or forty-six books.

- I. The twelve *Angas* or limbs.
- II. The twelve *Upangas*, or secondary limbs
- III. The ten *Painnas*, or ‘Scattered pieces’
- IV. The six *Cheya-Suttas*
- V. Individual texts (two)
- VI. The four *Mula-Suttas*

The *Angas* treat the life of the monks; are mostly made up of sermons on various themes of importance to the Jains. *Ahimsa* is a central feature, and often stressed upon. There is an *Upanga* (sub-section) for each of the *Angas*. They are of varied content, mainly dogmatic and mythological. The term *Anga* means - what comes out (from the mouth of the Lord). It is generally accepted that whatever Lord Mahavira taught after gaining omniscience, was compiled by his *Ganadharas* in twelve parts, the Sanskrit word for part being *Anga*. These twelve compilations are therefore called the twelve *Angas* and are collectively known as *Dwadashangi*. The foremost of these *Angas* is the *Aacharang Sutra*. Other well known *Angas* are *Sutrakritang*, *Samavayang*, *Sthanang*, and *Vyakhya Pragnapti* which is more popularly known as *Bhagavati Sutra*. Based on these *Angas*, the seers also compiled twelve auxiliary works that came to be known as *Upangas*. These twenty-four compilations should have been completed by the time of Jambuswami, who was the second successor of the religious order set up by Lord Mahavira, and was also the last omniscient of the current time cycle. The *Painnas*, or Scattered Pieces, deal with almost every topic of interest to the Jains, in both prose and verse. The fourth division of the canon corresponds roughly with the *Vinaya-pitaka* of the *Pali* Buddhist canon, and probably contains a great deal of quite ancient material. The most representative of this section is the *Kalpa-Sutra* which is supposed to have been written by the great Jain Bhadrabahu, the sixth head of the movement after Mahavira.

Of the *Mula-Sutras*, the first which is *Uttaradhyana-Sutra*, is best known in the West, and is one of the most valuable books in the whole canon for an understanding of Jainism. It is partly poetic and partly prose. It contains sermons, proverbs, advice to students, counsel to monks and nuns, parables, dialogues, and ballads. The two individual texts, at times mentioned before and at times after the *Mula-Sutras*, are sometimes listed among the Scattered Pieces. They are not primarily religious in content though they do deal in part with religious subjects. They may be characterized rather as encyclopedias “dealing with everything that should be known by a Jain monk.”

1.5 THE CONCEPT OF GOD

Jainism does not believe in a personal God or a creator God. According to the Jaina philosophical works, the definition of God is as follows: God is that soul who has completely removed all the *Karmas*. The defining characteristic of Godhood is identical with that of liberation itself. To attain liberation is to

attain Godhood. The term '*Isvara*' can very well apply to the soul that has become powerful by attaining its perfectly pure nature constituted of four characteristics, which are , infinite knowledge, infinite vision, infinite power, and infinite bliss. By constant practice of spiritual discipline, spiritually right knowledge, and right conduct, the means of liberation gradually develop and ultimately attain perfection. And when they attain perfection, all the coverings get removed and all the bondages are cut off. As a result, the soul's natural qualities get fully manifested. To attain this state is to attain Godhood. Though the Jains reject God as the creator of the world, they think it is necessary to meditate on and worship the liberated, perfect souls. Prayers are offered to them for guidance and inspiration. According to the Jain religion, worship is not for seeking mercy and pardon. In spite of the absence of a creator-God, the religious spirit of the Jaina lacks neither in internal fervour nor in external ceremonial expressions. As the lay community increased in Jainism, there evolved also rituals and religious practices.

1.6 THE CONCEPT OF SOUL

The Jaina holds that every living and non-living being is gifted with souls. All souls are not equally conscious, but every soul has the potential to attain infinite consciousness, power, and happiness. The soul is inherently perfect. These qualities are inherent in the very nature of the soul. Each *Jiva* (soul) is eternally associated with *Ajiva* (non-sentient or non-conscious being) because of *Karman*. They are obstructed by *karma*, just as the natural light of the sun is hindered by clouds. By removing the *karmas*, a soul can remove bondage and regain its natural perfections. But what then are these obstacles and how do they come to rob the soul of its native perfections? The obstacles, the Jaina asserts, are constituted by matter-particles which infect the soul and overpower its nature qualities. In other words, the limitations that we find in any individual's soul are due to the material body with which the soul has identified itself. The *Karma* or the sum of the past life of a soul - its past thought, speech, and activity – generates in it certain blind cravings and passions that seek satisfaction. Those cravings in a soul attract to it particular sorts of matter-particles and organize them into the body unconsciously desired. Jaina writers point out that bondage or the fall of the soul begins in thought. They therefore speak of two kinds of bondage: (1) internal or ideal bondage, that is to say, the soul's bondage to bad disposition (*bhava-bandha*), and (2) its effect, which is material bondage, that is to say, the soul's actual association with matter (*dravya-bandha*). But we should keep in mind that the soul, for the Jaina, is not devoid of extension, but co-extensive with the living body. The soul is the *jiva*, the living being; and in every part of the living body we find matter as well.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is the concept of God in Jainism?

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2) What is the concept of Soul in Jainism?

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1.7 JAINA ETHICS

The most important part of Jaina philosophy is its ethics. Metaphysics or epistemology is useful for the Jaina insofar as it guides him to right conduct. The goal of right conduct is salvation (*moksa*), which negatively means the removal of all bondage of the soul, and positively, the attainment of liberation.

Twelve Vows: In the activities dealing with spiritual discipline for the layman, there occurs the exposition of twelve vows. They are: the gross vow of refraining from violence, the gross vow of refraining from telling lies, the gross vow of refraining from taking anything which is not given, the vow of refraining from sexual activities, the gross vow of limiting one's possessions, the vow of limiting the area of acts that are not virtuous, the vow of limiting the quality of things that could be used once as also of things that could be used repeatedly, the vow to abstain from harmful activities that serve no useful purpose, the vow of remaining completely equanimous for a fixed period of time, the vow of reducing the limits of the area set forth in the sixth vow for a limited period of time, the vow of observing fast and living like a monk for certain days, and the vow of sharing things with deserving guests.

Pancha Vratas: Jaina writers are not unanimous about the necessity of all the above steps. Some of them select the first five, namely, the five great vows (*Pancha Vratas*) as sufficient for the perfection of conduct.

Ahimsa: Non-violence: Among the five, *ahimsa* is the most important vow. It is really a positive virtue based upon universal love and mercy towards all beings. *Ahimsa* is abstinence from all injury to life, life that exists not simply in the moving beings (*trasa*), but also in some non-moving ones (*sthavara*), such as plants and beings inhabiting the bodies of the earth. Abstinence from injury to life must be observed in thought, word, and deed – *Mana*, *Vachana*, and *Kaya* respectively. Hence the principle of *Ahimsa* – non-violence, naturally implies purity of thought, word, and deed. Thus, *ahimsa vritha* is binding to all members of the society, whether householder or ascetic. In the case of the householder, it is applicable with a limitation. In the case of ascetics, it is to be observed absolutely without any limitation.

Satya or Truth: This vow is abstinence from falsehood. The vow of *satya* or truthfulness consists in speaking what is true, as well as what is pleasant and good. Truthfulness is not only speaking what is true, but speaking what is true as well as good and pleasant. It is also pointed out that for the perfect maintenance of this vow, one must conquer greed, fear and anger.

Astheya or 'Non-stealing': This vow consists in not taking what is not given. This vow also includes abstinence from evil practices. The vow of *asteya* or 'non-stealing' is based on the idea of the sanctity of property.

Brahmacharaya: The vow of brahmacharaya consists in abstaining from all forms of self-indulgence. This refers to purity of personal conduct in the matter of sex. This vow when applied to the ascetic implies absolute celibacy, since a saint who has renounced all possible connections with the outside world is expected to practise strict celibacy. For the complete maintenance of this vow, one must desist from all forms of self-indulgence – external and internal, subtle and gross, mundane and extra-mundane, direct and indirect.

Aparigraha or Abstinence from all attachment: The vow of *aparigraha* consists in abstaining from all attachment to the senses – pleasant sound, touch, colour, taste, and smell. Attachment to the world's objects means bondage to the world, and the force of this causes rebirth. Liberation is impossible without the withdrawal of attachment. In the case of the ascetic, he must practise non-possession strictly in thought, word, and deed. But in the case of the householder, such a complete renunciation will be meaningless. Since the householder is also expected to keep in mind the ultimate goal of life, which is the realization of the true self, he must also practise isolating himself, as far as possible, from attachment to external things.

Right knowledge, faith, and conduct jointly bring about liberation consisting in fourfold perfection. When a person, through the harmonious development of these three, succeeds in overcoming the forces of all passions and *karmas*, old and new, the soul is freed from its bondage to matter and attains liberation. Being free from the obstacles of matter, the soul realizes its inherent potentiality. It attains the fourfold perfection, namely, infinite knowledge, infinite faith, infinite power, and infinite bliss.

1.8 LIBERATION (*MOKSA*)

If the bondage of the soul is its association with matter, liberation must mean the complete dissociation of the soul from matter. Liberation is the expulsion of matter from the soul. On account of the removal of the causes of bondage, as also on account of the dissociation of the bound *karmas*, there takes place the total and absolute dissociation of all *karmas*. This is liberation. In liberation the soul is totally and absolutely free from all *karmas* and consequently established in its pure and pristine state. All the miseries a soul experiences in the world are due to its desire for sensual pleasures. Afflictions due to desire for sensual pleasures are the only afflictions that we find in the world. The cause of passions, the afflictions for sensual pleasures, ultimately spring from our ignorance. Those who are afflicted with desires arising from delusion or nescience find pleasure in activities inspired by it.

Our ignorance about the real nature of our souls and other things leads to anger, vanity, infatuation, and greed. Knowledge alone can remove ignorance. The Jains, therefore, stress the necessity of right knowledge (*samyag-jnana*) or the knowledge of reality. Right knowledge can be obtained only by carefully studying the teachings of the omniscient *tirthankaras* or teachers who have already attained liberation and are therefore fit to lead others out of bondage. But before we feel inclined to study the teachings, we must have a general acquaintance with the essentials of their teachings and faith in those teachers. This sort of faith (called *samyag-darshana*) paves the way for right knowledge (*samyag-jnana*) and is therefore regarded as indispensable. But mere knowledge is of no use unless it is put to practice. Right conduct (*samyak-caritra*) is

therefore regarded by the Jainas as the third indispensable condition of liberation. In right conduct, a man has to control his passions, his senses, his thought, speech, and action, in the light of right knowledge. Thus, in Jainism, liberation is attained only through the human body.

Right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct have therefore come to be known in Jain ethics as the three gems (*triranta*). The path to liberation lies through right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct. Liberation is the joint effect of these three. Jain philosophy does not accept the principle that after having attained absolute freedom a soul comes again into this world in the form of incarnation.

Right Faith (*samyag-darshana*): Right faith is an attitude of respect (*sraddha*) towards truth. This faith may be innate and spontaneous in some, but for others it may be acquired by learning or culture. In short, right faith is the respect for truth. It should not be believed that the followers of Jainism have to blindly accept what is taught by the *tirthankaras*. The attitude of the Jainas is rationalistic rather than dogmatic. The initial faith is necessary and so is a reasonable attitude. This is because it is the minimum will to believe, without which no study can rationally begin. Starting with partial faith and studying further, if the beginner finds that the Jain teachings are reasonable, he finds his faith increasing. Perfect faith can result only from perfect knowledge. It is a cyclical process.

Right Knowledge (*samyag-jnana*): Right knowledge consists in the detailed knowledge of all truths. It means the knowledge of the nature of the soul also as the means of spiritual welfare. In order to completely know the nature of the soul, it is necessary to know even the material *karmic* covering that affects it. All our miseries and distresses are due to our ignorance of the soul. In other words, right knowledge is the truth towards understanding about the distinction between *Jiva* and *Ajiva*.

Right Conduct (*samyak-caritra*): Right conduct is refraining from wrong and performing what is right. The fruit of knowledge of reality is the refrainment from the vicious acts, and it alone is right conduct. The true meaning of 'right conduct' is to make one's life pure, keeping it aloof from vices and moral defilements, and to help others strive for the good according to one's ability. Generally, right conduct is divided into two grades – right conduct for the mendicant and right conduct for the layman. Right conduct for the mendicant is called *sadhu dharma* and right conduct for the layman is called *grahastha dharma*. A man who performs acts beneficial to himself as well as to others is a *sadhu* (a saint, mendicant). He follows five major scale vows: refraining from violence, refraining from telling lies, refraining from taking anything that is not given, refraining from sexual activities and refraining from possessions and attachment for possessions. Those who are not qualified for the monastic discipline can make their lives fruitful by observing the spiritual discipline meant for laymen.

1.9 JAIN SECTS

Shortly after the death of Mahavira, the community split into several sects. There are two important Jain sects, the *Svetambaras* (wearers of white clothes) and the *Digambaras* (the naked). Their division was on the basis of nudity. The literal meaning of the word *digambara* is sky-clad and that of *svetambara*

is white clad. These two sects are divided into a number of sects. The *Digambaras* contend that perfection cannot be reached by anyone who wears clothing. The *Digambara* thinks that a man should abstain from food and possessions, including clothing, to become a saint. They also denied the eligibility of women for salvation. The *Digambaras* strictly maintain that there can be no salvation without nakedness. Since women cannot go without clothes, they are said to be incapable of salvation. The *Digambaras* believe that no original canonical text exists now. The *Svetambaras* still preserve a good number of original scriptures. They believe that having known that the true self consists in the freedom from passions, having realized the strength of the spiritual practice of non-attachment, and having understood the gradual order of undertaking the practice of the means of liberation, one can very well understand a monk's acceptance of clothing. The only essential point is that when one attains the state of perfect non-attachment, one definitely attains liberation, irrespective of one's being nude or not. Clothing is not an obstacle to salvation. It is attachment that acts as an obstacle to salvation. The *Svetambaras* also allow women to enter the monastic order under the assumption that they have a possibility of attaining Nirvana.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What are the three jewels in Jainism to attain liberation?

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2) Which are the five important vows in Jainism?

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3) Which are the main sects in Jainism?

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1.10 LET US SUM UP

In today's world, where religion is losing its grip on humanity, Jainism plays an important role. In spite of its small number of followers, it continues to inspire and influence many. In modern times, Jainism is undergoing a process of revival. This is partly due to the Western interest in this old religious tradition of India. Numerous scholarly works have been written on Jainism by Western authors as well as Indian Jains. Jainism holds an integral view of life. Either faith or

only knowledge by itself cannot take us to the path of salvation. We should have a combination of right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct to tread the path of salvation. These constitute the three jewels of Jainism. Jainism teaches us that it is possible to attain liberation, and thereby one's potentials, through personal efforts. The message of Jainism is full of pragmatic optimism. The core of the Jaina religion is its ethics. Jainism had exerted and still exerts immense influence on humanity. This is especially notable in their propagation and promotion of the ideal of non-violence. The religion of the Jaina is a religion of the strong and the brave. It is a religion of self-help.

1.11 KEY WORDS

Liberation (Moksa): The ultimate aim of any soul in Jainism is liberation from bondage and *karmic* matters. This can be achieved through one's own personal efforts. God has no role to play in liberation. The state of liberation is the state of Godhood; there one achieves the four infinite qualities.

Ahimsa (non-violence): It is the key message of Jainism. The principle of non-violence (non -injury to life) in Jainism embraces not only human beings but also animals, birds, plants, vegetables, and creatures on the earth, in the air, and water. It is the holy law of compassion extended to body, mind, and the speech of living beings.

1.12 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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