

History Research Center

Jainism

The name *Jain* derives from *jina* (victory); Jainism is thus the religion of the "victorious one"--any human being who by his or her own effort has conquered the lower passions and thus become free of attachments to things. Most Jains believe that their faith was founded by a lineage of 24 teacher/saints, the Tirthankaras. The Tirthankaras have provided human beings with a means to cross the ocean of *samsara* (the cycle of existence) by providing a vessel, namely, the dharma, or teachings.

Most scholars consider the 24 Tirthankaras to be mythical or at best semimythical beings. For example, one of the 24, Nemi, is said to have lived for 1,000 years. They believe that Jain history really begins with Parshvanatha (c. 900 BCE), the son of the ruler of Benares (Varanasi). A successful soldier and husband, at the age of 30 Parshvanatha withdrew from his elite existence to become an ascetic. As he wandered India, he gathered followers to whom he advocated four laws of life--do not take life, do not lie, do not steal, and do not own property. He built the first Jain monastery on Mount Sammeda, where he died; it is a prominent pilgrimage site for Jains.

More important for the development of Jainism was Vardhamana (c. 599-c. 527 BCE), later known as Mahavira, the last of the 24 Tirthankaras. Mahavira lived most of his life without clothes, the most visible symbol of the renounced life. After some 12 years as an ascetic, he managed to overcome worldly passions and become the Victor. Jains describe his state of mind as *kevala-jnana*, or perfect perception, knowledge, power, and bliss. He lived another 30 years traveling around India and attracting people to his life. A large lay community emerged to supplement the small monastic community created three centuries before by Parshvanatha. Mahavira reorganized the Jain movement with followers assuming one of four roles: monks (*sadhu*), nuns (*sadhvi*), laymen (*shravak*), and laywomen (*shravika*).

Mahavira articulated the primary principles by which Jains live: nonviolence (*ahimsa*), or the refusal to cause harm to any living things; truthfulness (*satya*), or the speaking only of harmless truth; nonstealing (*asteya*), not to take anything not properly given; chastity (*brahmacharya*), or refusal to indulge in sensual pleasures; nonpossession (*aparigraha*), or detachment from people, places, and material things. Monks took these as their law of life, while laypeople simply adopted a less austere existence. Several hundred years after Mahavira, the oral tradition that had until then guided the Jain community began to be written.

According to Jain tradition, Mahavira had 11 chief followers, or *ganadharas*. All these disciples are said to have achieved omniscience after 12 years of mendicancy. The last of the 11 to reach omniscience were Indrabhuti Gautama and Sudharman, who were left to lead the fledgling Jain community. It is they who probably created the various rescensions of the extant Jain canon; they also figure prominently as the chief questioners of Mahavira in the canonical dialogues.

Around 300 BCE, Jainism split into two basic communities, the Shvetambaras (clothed) and the Digambaras (unclothed). Each subsequently divided into a number of sectarian bodies. The movement took a great leap forward in the 12th century CE when the ruler of Gujarat was converted and turned his realm into a Jain state. In the next century, Muslim expansion in India stopped further Jain growth, but Gujarat remains the home to the largest Jain community worldwide.

Jain Beliefs

Jains picture a three-story universe with humans residing in the middle level. The earthly realm is the realm of human action. Humans should be seeking the state of moksha (liberation), pictured spatially as the top of the universe; there they can remain in a state of eternal bliss and peace. However, the average person goes to the lower realm at the end of earthly existence, to be punished for his or her misdeeds.

Each being has a *jiva*, or soul: humans, animals, and even some plants. This soul accumulates karma as dust clings to an object. Karma is considered a physical reality and can be removed only by the most concerted right conduct, which must eventually include strict asceticism. Only then can the karmic matter be scraped off the soul so that the soul may go to the top of the universe and exist in eternal effulgence forever. The three "jewels," main tenets of Jainism, are right knowledge (*samyagjnana*), right action (*samyakcaritra*), and right view (*samyagdarshana*).

One important concept for Jains is *bhavyatva*--a special quality that most souls possess that makes it possible to reach salvation through a permanent escape from the bonds of karma and rebirth. *Bhavyatva* is viewed as something of an inert possibility, which may or may not be triggered by the karma of the person who possesses it. The Jains, unlike most Hindus, accept the idea that some souls will never escape the round of birth and rebirth; they may lack *bhavyatva*, or they may lack the ability to activate it.

Today, a person wishing to adhere to the Jain community must profess belief in the teachings of the *jinās* and simultaneously renounce his or her attachment to any other religion. The convert then vows (1) not intentionally to take life (*ahimsa*); (2) not to lie or exaggerate (*satya*); (3) not to steal (*achaurya*); (4) to refrain from marital unfaithfulness and unchaste thoughts (*brahmacharya*); (5) to limit accumulation of possessions and give away extras (*aparigraha*); (6) to put bounds on oneself so as to decrease the possibility of committing transgressions (*dik*); (7) to limit the number of both consumable and nonconsumable items in one's possession (*bhoga-upbhoga*); (8) to avoid unnecessary evil (*anartha-danda*); (9) to observe periods of meditation (*samayik*); (10) to observe periods of self-imposed limitations (*desavakasika*); (11) to live periodically as an ascetic/monk (*pausadha*); and (12) to support the monastic community (*atithi samvibhaga*).

The vows imply that Jains will be vegetarians (most do not even consume eggs) and will refrain from vocations that include the taking of life. The more strictly observant would not, for example, take up farming, which might lead to killing of living creatures (worms, insects, etc). Jains prefer business and various intellectual activities. The monastic life is most preferred.

Jains see themselves as following a path to self-realization. Steps along the path include the gaining of right perceptions (*mati*), clear scriptural knowledge (*sruta*), supernatural knowledge (*avadhi*), clear knowledge of the thought of others (*manahparyaya*), and omniscience (*kevala*). Those few who attain *kevala* are considered to be perfected ones (*siddhas*). The path generally takes many lifetimes. Ultimately, the fully realized soul moves to the top of the universe to reside forever in a karma-free condition.

The many Jain temples are sites of worship and veneration of the *jinās*, which assist on the road of self-realization. These may be identified with the Jain symbol, a swastika above which are three dots and a half Moon. The symbol predates the German Nazi swastika by many centuries and bears no relation to it. Inside the temples one generally finds statues of one or more of the Jain saints, who in Digambara temples are usually pictured in the nude.

Divisions within the Jain Community

The major division in the Jain community arose in the fifth century BCE and became formalized around 300 BCE, when the Jain scripture was written. The division between monks who wore clothes and those who did not eventually resulted in the separation of the Digambaras from the Svetambaras.

The Digambaras teach that nudity is integral to the teachings of Mahavira; they believe that monks should be devoid of any possessions, including clothes, and should not want to protect their bodies from the elements. They depict Mahavira in complete nudity, without any ornamentation, with downcast eyes. They also teach that Mahavira never married and was celibate throughout his earthly existence.

Digambaras also teach that the words of Mahavira, reputedly contained in the 11 Angas of the Jain canon, were lost forever at the end of the fourth century BCE. That loss, they believe, caused the Jains to write the rest of their scriptures. They refuse to accept the 11 *angas* that are considered canonical by the Svetambaras, which now form part of the 41 *sutras*. Finally, the Digambaras do not allow women to join the order of the renounced life, as women are not believed to be qualified for the austerity demanded of renunciators.

In contrast, the Svetambaras teach that some of the original Tirthankaras lived as clothed persons. They emphasize that Parshvanath, the saint immediately prior to Mahavira, wore white robes. Mahavira, they note, did not become an ascetic until his parents died and he fulfilled his necessary family duties. The Svetambaras believe that the words of Mahavira were not lost and may be found in the 11 surviving Angas of the Jain canon. They also believe that women can attain sainthood, noting that at least one of the Tirthankaras, Malli, was a female.

Today the Digambaras are found mostly in the southern part of India, especially in Mysore state, while the Svetambaras are primarily to be found in Gujarat and Rajasthan. Meanwhile, the modern Indian government has made various attempts to limit public nudity by the Digambara monks.

Contemporary Jain Communities

Today, in India, most Jains are found in business and trade. Unlike Sikhs and Buddhists, they have not attempted to distinguish themselves from Hindus, and the two communities have a working relationship.

The austere Jain lifestyle tended to slow the spread of the community beyond India. Besides, many taught that travel by monks by any means other than foot was immoral. One of the earliest appearances of a Jain outside India occurred in 1893, when Virchand Gandhi made a presentation at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. A few other individuals, such as Champat Rai Jain, who traveled to England in the 1930s, appeared in the West through the early 20th century, but real communities did not emerge until the 1950s, when migration to England began. By the end of the century there were some 30,000 Jains in the United Kingdom, most from Gujarat, who organized the Federation of Jain Organisations in the United Kingdom.

Migration to North America followed in the 1970s, and now centers can be found throughout the eastern half of the United States plus Texas and California. These joined with Canadian centers in the Federation of Jain Associations in North America. Several Jain teachers in the United States founded organizations that attempt to spread Jain teaching among non-Indians: the International Mahavir Jain Missionis centered in New Jersey and the Jain Meditation International Center with several branches in the United States and Canada. Jains may also be found in Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan.

Further Information

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