

UNIT 4 - INTRODUCTION TO JAINISM

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1. Jainism dates back to 599 BC¹. The Jains claim that their religion was founded by twenty-four great ascetics, of which the historical founder was only the last. These founders are called Jinas, conquerors and their followers are called Jainas or Jains.

2. Its historical founder Mahavir (the Conquerer) was born in Vaisali, about 30 miles from Patna, the capital of Bihar, in India on 30th March 599 BC.

3. His father, one of the leaders (ruler) of the Lichchavi tribe and a man of considerable wealth, was professing a religious belief which was opposed that of Vedas.

4. The self-organised death of his parents reduced Mahavir to a state of dejection. He left home, his wife and only daughter in the age of 30 and became a wandering holy man.

5. ENLIGHTENMENT

For thirteen years he roamed the country of western Bengal practising austerities of the most extreme variety. At last the light came to him. He was sitting crossed legged and with arms crossed, as in many statues, on the banks of river Rijubaluka, when the truth dawned on him, and he saw 'all conditions of the world, of gods, men and demon, all living things, where they come from and where they go to'.

6. He died (ascended to Nirvana) in November, 527 BC at the age of 72, at a place called Pavapuri; by that time he had gathered around him eleven close disciples, 4,200 monks of the new Order and about 14,000 disciples.

7. THE DIVISIONS

The great schism in the ranks of Jains occurred in the beginning of twentieth century when some Jain scholars challenged the propriety of wandering naked. The whole order was then divided between the 'sky clad' those who chose to be naked, and 'white clad' those who chose to wear clothes.

8. HOLY BOOKS

The Jain holy scriptures are known as Angas. After the death of Mahavir, his followers passed on his teachings from one generation to another by memory, until about the fifth century A.D. when they were written down in eleven books and were called Angas, meaning the body limbs. The other Jain holy book is called Purvas. The Jain scriptures were written in People's language called Ardhamagadhi.

9. Jains accept the Hindu ideas of the soul, rebirth and karma (deeds). In direct opposition to Buddhism it teaches the existence of Self as a stable and external principle. However, the common thoughts between Buddhists and Jains are:

0. The perfect souls reside on the top of the world in heavens,
- i. they leave their bodies in this world and
- ii. go in Nirvana on reaching perfection

10. THE VOWS

The Jains are obliged to take the following vows:

0. vow not to kill
- i. vow not to insult
- ii. vow not to torment
- iii. vow not to persecute and
- iv. vow not to ill use any kind of living being, any kind of creature, any kind of a thing having a soul.
- v. vow not to lie
- vi. vow not to take that which is not a gift
- vii. vow to avoid all sensual pleasures
- viii. vow to avoid all attachments. (including the attachment of ears, music; eyes, films etc)

11. The above vows are to be fulfilled in:

0. thoughts
- i. words
- ii. deeds
- iii. eating and
- iv. drinking

This means that nothing must be thought, no intentions formulated, that might lead to an action of killing or destroying, insulting, tormenting, persecuting of ill using anything having a soul. Careless walking or even putting down the begging bowl which might kill insects is also forbidden. While eating or drinking, a Jain must make sure that he does not destroy any life in the process.

12. THE TEACHINGS

Mahavir's explanation of the nature and meaning of life is summed up in his theory of 'Three Jewels': right Faith, right knowledge and right conduct.

13. The Jain scriptures regard karma as a poison of the soul, and suggest methods to destroy the old karma and ward off the new. It rejects the Hindu thought that liberation comes through knowledge, and replaces it with good karma. The Jain teachings are based on morality and purity.

14. The Jains believe that the universe is peopled by infinite number of souls. These souls are captive of material bodies and karmas. Nirvana (liberation, salvation) comes by freeing the soul from the matter. After many births the soul may be released and go to Nirvana, a place of peace at the top of the universe.

15. The life is mainly controlled by the karmas. The karmas decide whether in the next life one goes up higher or descends lower. However, it is only the highest category of souls which will enter Nirvana

16. Not only humans, but animals, birds, reptiles, sea creatures, insects, vegetation and even stones have souls.

17. The Hindu gods too, like humans, are caught up in the struggle with maya (matter) and seek to break free into Nirvana. The 24 Jinas, living in Nirvana, are higher than gods and gods have to be reborn as saints before finding Nirvana.

18. The Jains are pure vegetarians, and monks wear a cloth over their mouths and brush the roads before them as they walk, so as to avoid killing and insect. They have animal hospitals attached to their temples.

19. THE PRAYER:

The Jain holy places are called Temples and Sthanaks (like monasteries) and the focal point of prayer and meditation is the image of Mahavir and other Jainas. At home, the Jains recite sacred texts as they get up. They use prayer-beads to recite the holy words and salute five kind of spiritual beings. Then they vow to live a good life, and not to injure any living being.

In temples they bow to 24 images of Jinas. Offerings are given to priests who place them in front of the images; usually rice is offered in a steel plate marked with a swastika.

The most well known prayer of Jains is known as 'Namaskara Mantar', it reads:

"I forgive all living beings;
Let all living beings forgive me;
All in this world are my friends;
I have no enemies."

20. THE FESTIVALS:

The following are important festivals of the Jains:

0. Mahavir Jayanti: the birthday of Mahavir, it falls in March-April
- i. The Paryushan/ Samtsari (Fasting and taking account of one's own karmas of the previous year): it falls in August-September². On this day the Jains must ask for forgiveness and also forgive all the members of their family and their friends. In fact it is an annual occasion of eight days for repentance and forgiveness.
- ii. Diwali: the Jains believe that on this day Mahavir ascended to Nirvana and Gautam, the chief disciple of Mahavir got enlightenment.

¹ This date varies from books to books.

² The Jain monks and nuns stay in Sthanaks during the months of rainy season, where they get training in holy scriptures.