

Jainism [History Notes for UPSC & Govt. Exams]

Jainism is a very important topic for the UPSC history, and art and culture segments. It is an important ancient religion that originated in India. In this article, you will find all the important facts and doctrines of Jainism, about the life of Mahavira, the various sects of Jainism and other vital details for the [IAS exam](#) and other government exams.

Vardhamana Mahavira - Life

Vardhamana Mahavira was born in 599 BCE in a village near Vaishali (Capital of Videha). He is considered to be a contemporary of the Buddha. His father was the head of a famous Kshatriya clan and his mother, a Lichchhavi princess. They were connected with the royal family of Magadha; high connections made it easy for Mahavira to approach princes and nobles in the course of his mission.

In the beginning, Mahavira led the life of a householder but in search of the truth, he abandoned the world at the age of 30 and became an ascetic. He wandered for 12 years practising severe austerities, fasting and meditation. At the age of 42, he attained perfect/infinite knowledge (kevalajnana), on the banks of the Rijupalika river. He propagated his religion for 30 years. Through kevalajnana, he conquered misery and happiness. Because of this conquest, he is known as 'Mahavira' or The Great Hero or 'Jina' i.e, the conqueror and his followers as 'Jainas'. He passed away and became a Siddha (fully liberated) at the age of 72 in 527 BCE at Pavapuri near Patna.

Doctrines of Jainism

The Jaina doctrine is much older than Buddhism. In Jainism, 'Tirthankara' refers to 24 enlightened spiritual masters who are believed to have achieved perfect knowledge through asceticism. Jainas don't see Mahavira as the founder of their religion but as the 24th Tirthankara in a long history of spiritual masters. The **first Tirthankara Rishabhadeva (symbol-bull)** is believed to be the first founder and has references in Rig Vega and Vayu Purana. Neminantha belonging to Saurashtra (Gujarat) is believed to be the 22nd Tirthankara, and the 23rd Tirthankara is believed to be Parshvanatha (of Banaras).

The core of Jaina doctrine is expressed in the principles given in the image below:

Doctrines of Jainism



- 01 Anekantavada (doctrine of manifold nature of reality)
- 02 Syadavada (the theory of conditioned predication)
- 03 Nayavada (theory of partial standpoints)
- 04 Triratna (three gems)
- 05 Pancha Mahavrata (five great vows)

Anekantavada - According to this doctrine, the objects have infinite modes of existence and qualities so they cannot be completely grasped in all aspects and manifestations by finite human perception. Only the Kevalins- the omniscient beings can comprehend objects in all aspects and manifestations; others are capable of only partial knowledge. Anekantavada is literally the doctrine of “non- onesidedness” or “manifoldness”, it is often translated as “non-absolutism”.

Syadavada- According to this doctrine, **all judgements are conditional**, holding good only in certain conditions, circumstances, or senses. As reality is complex no single proposition can express the nature of reality fully. Thus the term “syat” (meaning - maybe) should be prefixed before each proposition giving it a conditional point of view and thus removing any dogmatism.

Nayavada - Nayavada is the theory of partial standpoints or viewpoints. The doctrine of Nayavada signifies the system of describing reality from different points of view. “Naya” can be understood as partially true statements but they cannot lay claim to absolute validity. It can also be defined as a particular opinion framed with a viewpoint, a viewpoint which does not rule out other viewpoints and is, therefore, an expression of a partial truth about an object.

Triratna - The three jewels of Jaina ethics must be followed to achieve the liberation of the soul. These are:

1. Samyag Darshana (Right faith) - This means seeing (hearing, feeling, etc.) things properly, avoiding preconceptions and superstitions that get in the way of seeing clearly.

2. **Samyag Jnana (Right knowledge)** - This means having an accurate and sufficient knowledge of the real universe. This requires a true knowledge of the five substances and nine truths of the universe with the right mental attitude.
3. **Samyag Charitra (Right conduct)** - This means to avoid harming living beings and freeing oneself from the attachment and other impure thoughts and attitudes.

Pancha Mahavrata (five great vows) - In order to attain Triratna, one has to observe Pancha Mahavrata (five great vows).

1. **Ahimsa (Non-violence)** - *Ahimsa parmo dharma* - Non-violence is the supreme religion. Non-violence is the cornerstone of Jainism, no living being has the right to injure, harm or kill any other living being including animals, plants and even insects. There are four forms of existence in Jainism - gods (deva), humans (manushya), hell beings (naraki), and animals and plants (tiryanca). Tiryanca are further divided into ekendriyas (having only one sense) and nigodas (having only sense of touch, they occur in clusters). The general laity following Jainism should avoid harming organisms with two or more senses while monks/renunciants are supposed to refrain from harming even ekendriyas and sthavara (element bodies), who are slightly higher than nigodas. Jainism strictly preaches vegetarianism as it prohibits harming/killing animals with two or more senses. In Jainism, it is the intention to harm, the absence of compassion, unawareness and ignorance that makes a person violent. Non-violence is to be observed in action, speech as well as thought.
2. **Satya (Truth)** - There is no place for lies in Jainism, one should always speak up the truth and only those who have conquered greed, fear, jealousy, anger, ego and frivolity can speak the truth.
3. **Achaurya or Asteya (Non-stealing)** - Jainism is against stealing/grabbing property by unjust/immoral methods. Even while accepting help, aid, alms one should not take more than what is required.
4. **Brahmacharya (Celibacy, Chastity - this vow was added by Mahavira)** - Celibacy refers to the total refraining from sensual pleasures. Even the thought of sensual pleasure is prohibited in Jainism. Monks are required to observe this vow completely while the general laity following Jainism should not indulge in any physical relationship other than with one's own spouse and that too of limited nature.
5. **Aparigraha (Non-attachment/Non-possession)** - One who seeks spiritual liberation should withdraw from all attachments to objects that please any of the five senses. Mahavira has said that “wants and desires have no end, and only the sky is the limit for them”. The wealth which a common man desires to attain creates attachment which will continuously result in greed, jealousy, selfishness, ego, hatred, violence, etc.

For a common man, to observe all the above five vows are difficult and they can practise them as far as their condition permits. The vows or “vratas” partially observed are called “Anuvratas” i.e, small or partial vow.

Buddhism and Jainism

Among Indian religions, Jainism and Buddhism are most related to each other. Jainism and Buddhism are alike in many aspects and have common features. Some of the similarities are:

- Both Buddhism and Jainism are atheistic, though Jainism believes in the existence of gods but places them lower than Jina (the conqueror).
- Both the religions revolted against the prevalent varna system, laid emphasis on renunciation and human efforts as a means to attain salvation. The people of all castes and social backgrounds were welcomed in Buddhism and Jainism. There are frequent mentions of a learned Jaina monk named Harikeshiya who belonged to a Chandala family.
- Buddha and Mahavira both belonged to the Kshatriya clan and gave it superiority over all other varnas including Brahmanas. They used the word “brahmana” in the sense of acknowledging a wise person who possesses true knowledge and lives an exemplary life.

Both the religions share so many similarities from outside, yet they are different upon deeper investigation into their details and teachings.

Spread of Jainism

Under this section, we will talk about the spread and influence of Jainism.

In order to spread the teachings of Jainism, Mahavira organized an order of his followers which admitted both men and women. Jainism gradually spread to western India where the Brahmanical religion was weak. Jainas adopted the Prakrit language of the masses to preach their doctrines and discarded the Sanskrit language which was patronized by the Brahmanas. The spread of Jainism in Karnataka is attributed to Chandragupta Maurya who became a Jaina and gave up his throne and spent the last years of his life in Karnataka as a Jaina ascetic. The second cause of the spread of Jainism in Southern India is said to be the great famine that took place in Magadha, 200 years after the death of Mahavira. The famine lasted for 12 years and in order to protect themselves many Jainas went to the south under the leadership of Bhadrabahu, but the rest stayed back in Magadha under the leadership of Sthulabahu. When the immigrants came back to Magadha, they developed differences with the local Jainas. The southerners began to be called Digambaras and the Magadhas as Shvetambaras.

Jainism spread to Kalinga in Odisha in the 4th century BCE and in the first century it enjoyed the patronage of the Kalinga King, Kharavela who had defeated the princes of Andhra & Magadha. In the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, it reached the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. In later centuries, Jainism penetrated Malwa, Gujarat, and Rajasthan and even now, these areas have a good number of Jainas, mainly engaged in trade and commerce. Although Jainism didn't win as much state patronage as

Buddhism and did not spread very fast in early times, it still retains its hold in the areas where it spread. On the other hand, Buddhism has practically disappeared from the Indian subcontinent.

Read more about the differences between Jainism and Buddhism [here](#).

Different Schools of Jainism

The different schools of Jainism are discussed below.

1. Digambara

1. Major sub-sects:

1. Bisapantha
2. Terapanth
3. Taranapantha/Samaiyapantha

2. Shvetambara

1. Major sub-sects:

1. Murtipujaka
2. Sthanakvasi
3. Terapanthi

Minor sub-sects:

1. Gumanapantha
2. Totapantha

DIGAMBARA	SHVETAMBARA
1. Literally means “sky clad”. Digambaras emphasize on nudity, as it is the absolute prerequisite to attain salvation.	1. Literally means “white clad”. Shvetambaras assert that complete nudity is not important for salvation.
2. They represent the Jainas who moved to the south under the leadership of Bhadrabahu when the great famine took place in Magadha (200 years after the death of Mahavira).	2. They represent the Jainas who stayed back in Magadha under the leadership of Sthulabahu when the famine struck.
3. According to Digambara tradition, on attaining enlightenment, an omniscient does not experience hunger, thirst, sleep, disease or fear.	3. According to Shvetambara tradition, an omniscient does require food.
4. According to Digambara, a woman lacks the kind of	4. Women are capable of attaining the

body and will power required to attain liberation (moksha), she has to be reborn as a man before such an attainment is possible. This school of Jainism does not accept the 19th Tirthankara as a female, but rather as a male named Mallinatha.	same spiritual accomplishments as men. In Shvetambara tradition, the 19th Tirthankara is a female named Mali (the only female Tirthankara).
5. Digambara tradition holds that Mahavira did not marry and renounced the world while his parents were still alive.	5. Mahavira did not marry and led a normal householder's life till the age of 30. It was only after his parents' death that he became an ascetic.
6. Digambara tradition represents the idols of Tirthankara as nude, unadorned and with downcast eyes in the contemplative mood.	6. Shvetambara tradition depicts the idols of Tirthankara wearing a loin-cloth, adorned with jewels and with glass eyes inserted in the marble.
7. For the hagiographies, the Digambaras make use of the term "Purana".	7. The Shvetambaras use the term "Charita".
8. The Digambara ascetic must give up all his possessions including clothes and is allowed to have Rajoharana (peacock feather broom to brush away insects) and a Kamandalu (a wooden water pot for toilet hygiene).	8. The Shvetambara ascetic is allowed to have fourteen belongings including loin-cloth, shoulder cloth, etc.
9. Digambaras hold that the original and genuine texts were lost long ago. They refused to accept the achievements of the first council which met under the leadership of Acharya Sthulibhadra and consequently the recasting of the angas.	9. The Shvetambaras believe in the validity and sacredness of canonical literature, i.e, the 12 angas and sutras.

Jainism Sub-sects

The division of the Jaina religion into two sects (Digambara & Shvetambara) was only the beginning of splitting the religious order into various sub-sects. Each of the two sects got divided into different major and minor sub-sects according to the differences in acknowledging or interpreting the religious texts and in the observance of religious practices.

Digambara Sub-sects

Major sub-sects

- **Bisapantha**

- The followers of Bisapantha support the religious authorities known as Bhattarakas, the head of Jaina Mathas (Dharma Gurus).
- The followers of this sect worship the idols of Tirthankaras and also the idols of Ksetrapala, Padmavati and other deities in their temples.
- The idols are worshipped with saffron, flowers, sweets, fruits, agarbattis (scented incense sticks), etc. They remain standing while worshipping and perform “arati” i.e, waving of lights over the idol and distribute prasad (sweets offered to idols).
- The Bisapantha, according to some, is the original form of the Digambara sect and today practically all Digambara Jainas from Maharashtra, Karnataka and South India, and a large number of Digambara Jainas from Rajasthan and Gujarat are followers of Bisapantha.
- **Terapantha**
 - Terapantha arose in India as a revolt against the domination and conduct of the Bhattarakas and consequently lost its importance in North India.
 - The followers of this sect worship the idols of Tirthankaras and not any other deity.
 - They worship the idols not with “sacchita” things which include flowers, fruits, and other green vegetables but with sacred rice called Aksata, cloves, sandal, almonds, dates, etc. Arati is not performed nor the prasada is distributed in the temples.
 - The followers of Terapantha are more in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.
- **Taranapantha or Samaiyapantha**
 - The followers worship Sarnaya i.e, sacred books and not the idols.
 - The three main traits of Taranapantha sect are:
 - The aversion to idol worship
 - The absence of outward religious practices
 - The ban on caste distinctions
 - The followers worship sacred books in their temples and are against idolatry.
 - The followers do not offer articles like fruits and flowers at the time of worship. More importance is given to spiritual values and the study of sacred literature.
 - The Taranapanthis are few in number and are mostly confined to Bundelkhand, Malwa area of Madhya Pradesh, and Khandesh area of Maharashtra.

Minor Sub-sects

- **Gumanapantha**
 - This sub-sect was started by Pandit Gumani Rai (son of Pandit Todarmal), resident of Jaipur, Rajasthan.
 - Its followers stress on the purity of conduct, self-discipline, and strict adherence to the precepts.
 - The followers are against the lighting of candles or lamps in the temples.
 - They only visit and view the image in the temples and do not make any offerings.

- The followers are mostly in Jaipur district of Rajasthan.
- **Totapantha**
 - The Totapantha came into existence as a result of differences between Bisapantha and Terapantha sects. Many efforts were made to strike a compromise between Bisa (twenty) Pantha and Tera (thirteen) Pantha and the outcome was Tota (sixteen and a half) Pantha. That is why the followers of Totapantha believe to some extent in the doctrines of Bisapantha and to some extent in those of Terapantha.
 - The followers are extremely few in number and are found in some pockets in Madhya Pradesh.

Shvetambara Sub-sects

- **Murtipujaka**
 - The followers are thorough worshipers of idols, offer flowers, fruits, etc. and adorn them with rich clothes and jewels.
 - They stay in temples or in the specially reserved buildings called “upasrayas”. They collect food in their bowls from householder’s houses and eat at their place of stay.
 - The Murtipujaka sub-sect is also known by terms like
 - Pujera (worshipers)
 - Deravasi (temple residents)
 - Chaityavasi (temple residents)
 - Mandira margi (temple goers)
 - They are largely found in Gujrat.
- **Sthanakvasi**
 - The Sthanakvasi do not believe in idol worship and do not have temples at all, instead, they have “Sthanakas”- prayer halls, where they carry on their religious fasts, festivals, prayers and discourses.
 - They have no faith in the places of pilgrimage and do not participate in the religious festivals of Murtipujaka Svetambaras.
 - They are also called by terms like
 - Dhundhiya (searchers)
 - Sadhumargi (followers of sadhus, ie, ascetics)
 - The followers are found mainly in Gujarat, Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan.
- **Terapanthi**
 - The followers are completely organised under the complete directions of one Acharya - the religious head, one code of conduct and one line of thought. All the monks and nuns follow the orders of their Acharya and carry out all the religious activities in accordance with his instructions. They also attach importance to the practice of meditation.
 - The Svetambara Terapanthis are considered reformists as they emphasise simplicity in religion. They do not even construct monasteries.

- They are found in Bikaner, Jodhpur, Mewar areas of Rajasthan.

The Terapantha sub-sects appear both among the Digambara and the Svetambara sub-sects, but the two are entirely different from each other. The Digambara Terapanthis believe in nudity and idol worship while Svetambara Terapanthis are quite the opposite.

Jaina Councils

Council	First	Second
Time Period	310 BCE	453 or 466 CE
Chairman	Sthulabhadra	Derridhiganj
Place	Pataliputra (Bihar)	Vallabhi (Gujarat)
Outcome	Compilation of 12 angas to replace 14 purvas	Compilation of 12 angas and 12 upangas.

Some Important Terms in Jainism

KEY TERMS	MEANINGS
Ganadharas	Chief disciples of Mahavira
Siddha	Fully liberated
Jiva	Soul
Chaitanya	Consciousness
Virya	Energy
Nirjara	Wearing out
Gunasthanas	Stages of purification
Arhat	One who has entered the stage of kevalajnana
Tirthankara	Arhat who has acquired the capability of teaching the doctrine
Basadis	Jaina monastic establishment