### Jainism

**1. Description**

The branch of Hinduism called Jainism arose in India in the sixth century BC. It was founded by Vardhamāna (599-527 BC), also called Mahavira, or the “great hero.” He was Indian, the son of a king, who lived in luxury until age 30, when reflections on life led him into a lifestyle of strict asceticism.

His history is unique in that he claimed to have attained *nirvana* in this life, at age 42. Subsequently, he became a religious teacher, instructing others seeking *nirvana*. His followers thought him to be divine. Mahavira considered himself the twenty-fourth in a series of *tirthankaras* (literally, “ford-makers”), whom followers of Jainism worship along with other lesser deities.[[1]](#footnote-1) The original writings of Mahavira are now lost, but in the first century AD, the monk Dharasena, working off his knowledge of early Jain literature, recreated his teaching in his work *Ṣaṭkhaṅḍāgama*, now the most authoritative writing in Jainism.[[2]](#footnote-2)

According to Jain teaching, devotees can attain *nirvana* in this life. The designation “Jainism,” in fact, means “victory.” The way to *nirvana*, according to Mahavira’s teaching, is through asceticism. *Karma* joins the spirit to the material world. Asceticism is necessary to break that bond.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Two classes of people make up Jainism: the laity and the monks. The laity must lead a moral life, refrain from certain foods, and contribute to the monks and the poor. They worship the *tirthankaras* and other lesser gods in order to receive personal blessing and inspiration from their example of spirituality.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Any individual (male or female) can devote himself/herself to monastic life, but he/she must surrender all personal property and vow to refrain from violence (even to animals), lying, possessions, stealing and sexual relations. Some monks refrain from wearing clothes (“sky-clad monks”), while others wear white (“white-clad monks”). An extreme practice among some is *sallekhana*, or self-starvation. Any activity can result in bad *karma*, so the preferred option is total inactivity.[[5]](#footnote-5)

According to Jainism, the Ultimate exists in two manifestations: a spiritual aspect called *jiva*, and a material aspect, or *ajiva*. These manifestations of the Divine exist eternally, without beginning. Therefore, there was no creation of the material world.[[6]](#footnote-6) As in Hinduism, Jainism also recognizes many lesser gods.

A unique feature of this teaching is the preservation of the individual. When a person attains *nirvana*, he/she is not “dissolved” into the Absolute, but remains a separate personality. Jainism also differs from Hinduism in its rejection of the caste system.[[7]](#footnote-7)

At the same time, Jainism shares with Hinduism a cyclic understanding of time. There exist six long periods of time, during which society reaches utopia, and then descends into degradation before a new cycle begins. Jains feel that we are now living in the next to last period of descent.[[8]](#footnote-8)

There are between four and six million adherents of Jainism, most of whom live in India.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**2. Evaluation**

Since Jainism shares many tenets with Hinduism, we may subject it to the same criticisms. Namely, the idea that Ultimate Reality is an impersonal force contradicts human sensibilities – people normally prefer the personal to the impersonal. In addition, people have no recollection of previous lives, which contradicts the teaching of reincarnation. On the other hand, Jainism has made some advances over classical Hinduism. Jains reject the assimilation of the individual into the Absolute and the caste system.

We can note other defects in this system. How can we know that Mahavira is qualified to define true religion, besides his self-claims to attainment of *nirvana*? In addition, we condemn the suicidal nature of this teaching – some monks take their devotion to the extreme of denying themselves the necessities of life. Finally, abandoning sound judgment, Jainism promotes attainment of *nirvana* through inactivity. Yet, a psychologically healthy individual strives to develop his/her potential and abilities. The Jain approach to “spirituality” results in arresting any progress for the improvement of the individual, or of human society.

**Resources Used:**

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1. Порублёв, Н. В. Культы и мировые религии. – М.: Благовестник, 1994. – P. 63; Hexham I. Understanding world religions. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. – P. 234; Davis R. H. Religions of India in practice // Asian religions in practice. – Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1999. – P. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shatkhandagama [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hexham, p. 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Davis, p. 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Davis, p. 21; Braswell G. W. Understanding world religions. – Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1994. – P. 139; Corduan W. A tapestry of faiths: The common threads between Christianity and world religions. – Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002. – P. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hexham, p. 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Порублёв, p. 64-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Corduan, p. 176-177, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Порублёв, p. 63; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jainism. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)