UNDERSTANDING FAITH
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Understanding Jainism

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Introduction

Jainism is an ancient religion of India with roughly 4–5 million adherents in India itself and a small but flourishing overseas community. The 2011 Indian census gives the figure of 4.2 million, but this is likely an undercount because some Jains return themselves as Hindu. This will doubtless strike readers as very tiny relative to the size of India, which indeed it is, but one must not be misled. If the number of Jains is small, their influence in Indian society is very great, far out of proportion to their numerical strength. This is a consequence of the fact that Jains – not all Jains, but most of them in India’s North – have specialised in business and business-related occupations. And while it is far from true that all Jains are rich (a national stereotype in India), Jains are among the wealthiest of modern India’s religious communities and one of the most influential as well.

In India, and abroad to the extent that they are known at all, Jains are noted for two behavioural traits. One is ahimsā (non-harm, non-violence), which is an ethic enjoined by their religion as well as a deeply entrenched cultural value. Jain mendicants, in particular, are renowned for the pains they take to avoid harming even the most microscopic of living things. Jains are also well known for the extent to which mendicants, and to an impressive extent laity also, engage in the most demanding ascetic practices, especially fasting. Illustrative of the importance of ascetic practice in Jain life is the fact that some Jains end their lives by means of ritualised self-starvation, and this includes laity as well as mendicants.

Jainism is frequently paired with Buddhism, its far better-known cousin. This makes sense because both traditions came into
We begin with a critical episode in Jain history as seen from the standpoint of Jain tradition.

The attainment of a follower of a “Jina,” and the term “Vijñānabhairava” is an introduction to Jain belief, practice, and tradition. Our starting point is the history of Jainism and its place and tradition. Our starting point is the history of Jainism and its place and tradition. Our starting point is the history of Jainism and its place

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Despite its small size, the Jain world is fissured by a number of belief systems and traditions. From the standpoints of sects, schisms, and denominations, Jainism’s two main branches: the Śvetāmbara (white-clad) and the Digambara (naked) are most prominent. The schisms are significant because they will be with us throughout the remainder of this book. This is the split between Jainism’s two main branches: the Śvetāmbara (white-clad) and the Digambara (naked).

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