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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

prominence during the same period of India's history, and they were alike in their mutual rejection of the Vedic traditions that centuries later came to form part of the core of Hinduism. In other respects, however, Buddhism and Jainism are quite unlike, with very different concepts of the ultimate goal of spiritual endeavour and the means to the attainment of that goal.

The term Jain means a follower of a 'Jina', and the term Jina denotes a 'victor' or 'conqueror'. The victory in question, however, is not won on the world's battlefields; instead, it consists of an inner conquest of the desires and aversions that are the root cause of the soul's bondage to the world and its sorrows. And the fruit of victory is not the usual spoils of war but liberation from worldly bondage. More specifically, a Jina is one of Jainism's great mendicant-teachers who, by means of rigorous self-purification, achieves liberating omniscience and – prior to his own final liberation – teaches the truths he has discovered to his followers. These teachers are also known as Tirthankaras, a term denoting someone who establishes a *tirtha* (ford, as in a ford across a river). The *tirtha* in question consists of Jain teachings and the Jain community, which is a community within which these teachings are preserved, transmitted, heard and acted upon. According to these teachings, such communities were, are and will always be established and re-established by an infinite series of Jina/Tirthankaras, a process that has been going on from the beginningless past and will continue for all of infinite time to come.

Despite its small size, the Jain world is fissured by a number of important sectarian divisions. Of these, one should be mentioned at the outset, because it will be with us throughout the remainder of this book. This is the split between Jainism's two main branches: the Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras. From the standpoint of soteriological doctrine, the difference between them is not great, but they are separated by a wide chasm indeed on a point of monastic discipline, namely whether or not mendicants should wear clothing. The term Śvetāmbara means 'white clad', and refers to the Jain branch in which monks and nuns wear white clothing. Digambara means 'space clad', and the monks of this branch (not the nuns) wear nothing. In general, the Śvetāmbaras predominate in India's North, although there are substantial Digambara communities in the North as well. The Jains

of South India are almost all Digambaras. The exact proportion of Śvetāmbaras versus Digambaras is not known, but Digambaras are probably somewhat less than half the total.

Understanding Jainism is an introduction to Jain belief, practice and tradition. Our starting point is the history of Jainism and its place in the history of Indian religions. We then turn to Jainism's most fundamental teachings about the nature of reality and the human situation. An understanding of these doctrinal basics provides an entry into an exploration of how Jainism's formal teachings are and are not embodied in mendicant and lay ways of life. We then set Jain belief and practice in a wider context of Jain cosmography, geography and biology, and we turn finally to the ways in which Jainism is linked to the identities of social groups in India. The groups in question are not those idealised in Jain sacred writings, but ones highly relevant to the actual lives of Jains.

We begin with a critical episode in Jain history as seen from the standpoint of Jain tradition.