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Jain Texts

Sacred Books of Jainism



EASTERN  TREASURES

The Jain Texts

SACRED BOOKS OF JAINISM

(7th-5th century BC)



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Introduction to Jainism (1884) by Hermann Jacobi

On the Indian Sect of the Jainas (1903) by Georg Bühler

Jains (1911) by Thomas William Rhys Davids

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JAIN TEXTS



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The Translations



Patna, the capital of Bihar, a state in eastern India — Jainism is believed to have originated in the Bihar area.



Pawapuri “the sinless town” is a holy site for Jains located in the Nalanda district of Bihar state.

The Akaranga

Translated by Hermann Jacobi, 1884

Along with Hinduism and Buddhism, Jainism is one of the three most ancient Indian religious traditions still in existence and an integral part of South Asian belief and practice. Scholars of religion generally hold that Jainism originated in the seventh to fifth century BC in the Ganges basin of eastern India (modern-day Bihar and surrounding regions), a scene of intense religious activity at that time. Buddhism also appeared in this region, as did other belief systems that renounced the world and opposed the ritualistic Brahmanic schools whose prestige derived from a claim of purity and ability to perform the traditional rituals. These new religious perspectives promoted asceticism, the abandonment of ritual, domestic and social action, and the attainment of spiritual illumination in an attempt to win, through one's own efforts, freedom from repeated rebirth.

Jainism teaches a path toward spiritual purity and enlightenment through disciplined non-violence (*ahimsa*) to all living creatures. The tradition is spiritually guided by 24 *tirthankaras* (ford-makers), supreme teachers who have conquered the cycle of rebirth and attained omniscience (*kevala jnana*). The core of Jain philosophy is established on three ethical pillars: *ahimsā* (non-violence), *anekāntavāda* (many-sided reality) and *aparigraha* (non-possession). Although its ultimate spiritual goal is *moksha* (liberation from *karma*), these ethical principles have fostered a community renowned for its high literacy, trusted role in commerce and distinct intellectual culture.

Jain philosophy includes the doctrine of “*anekāntavāda*”, which holds that truth and reality are complex and have multiple aspects. Therefore, no single viewpoint is regarded as absolutely ‘complete’. This framework encourages intellectual humility and conflict resolution, in contrast to what tradition terms “one-sided” (*ekānta*) views. Ethically, the vow of *aparigraha* (non-attachment) requires monks to renounce all property and encourages laypersons to limit their possessions and desires. Historically, the application of non-violence led the Jain community to avoid agriculture and warfare, with many Jains engaging in trade and banking, becoming a notable mercantile presence in ancient and medieval India. The community supported networks of temples, libraries and charitable institutions.

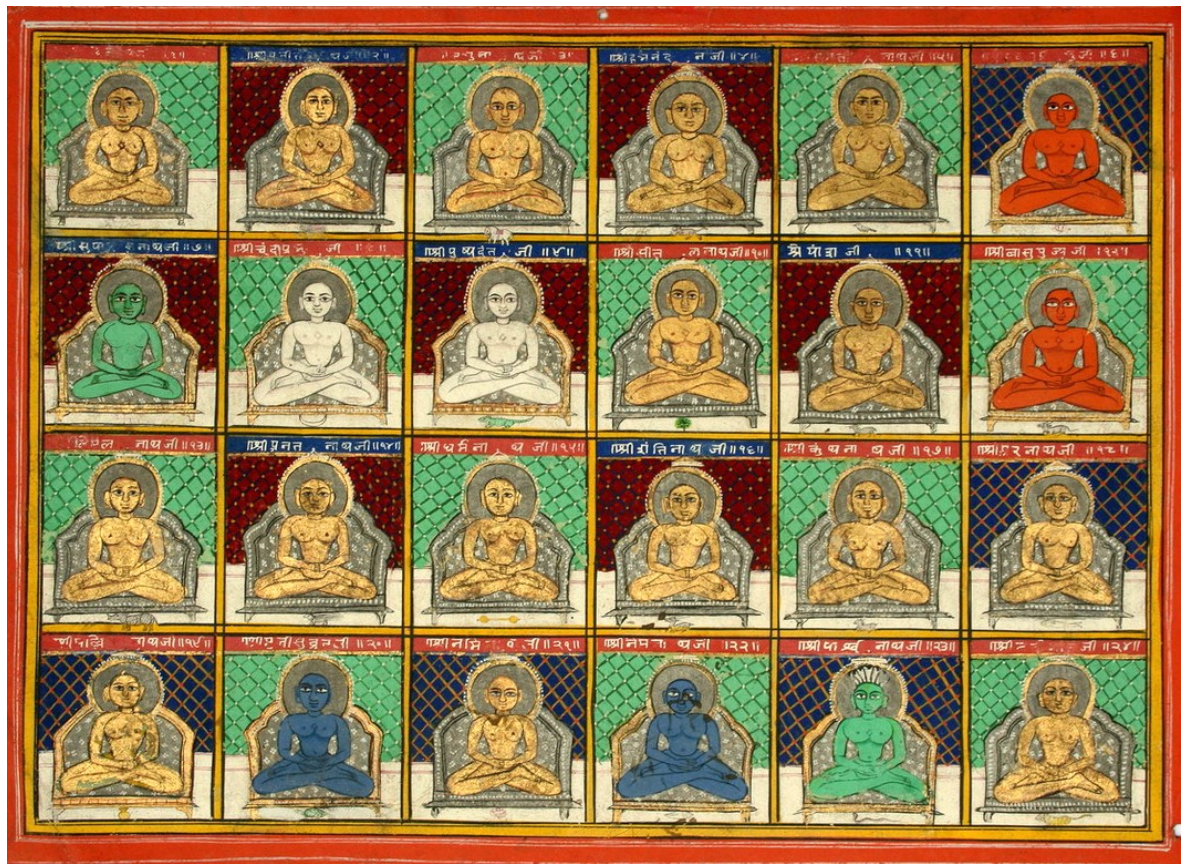
Today, Jainism has approximately five million followers, known as Jains, residing mostly in India, with diaspora communities in North America, Europe and East Asia. The community is divided into two major sub-traditions, the *Digambaras* (sky-clad) and *Śvētāmbaras* (white-clad), which differ on ascetic practices, gender and canonical texts, while sharing a core philosophy. Over the centuries, Jains have significantly contributed to the development of logic, art, architecture, law, and ethics in Indian culture.

The name Jainism comes from *ji*, the Sanskrit for “to conquer,” referring to the battle against the passions and bodily desires in reaching omniscience. Those few who accomplish this are called *jina*, “conqueror.” The ultimate goal for ascetics is to reach *moksha* (liberation), while for most Jain laypersons it is to accumulate good *karma* that leads to better rebirth and a step closer to liberation. Purification of the soul and liberation are held to be achievable through the three jewels (*ratnatraya*): *samyak*

darśana, (faith in the Jain scriptures); *samyak gyana*, (right understanding of the Jain teachings); and *samyak charitra*, (correct behavior consistent with these teachings).

Composed in Ardhamagadhi Prakrit, an ancient Middle Indo-Aryan vernacular language, *The Akaranga* is the oldest and most revered canonical text within the Svetambara tradition. It serves as a foundational pillar of Jain philosophy and practice. Believed to have been compiled around the fourth or third century BC from the oral teachings of Lord Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara, it represents the very first of the eleven primary *Angas* (limbs) of Jain scripture. The text is divided into two distinct books; the first is written in archaic Ardhamagadhi prose and verse, capturing some of the earliest recorded expressions of Jain thought, while the second consists of later supplementary material that expands on monastic duties.

Fundamentally, *The Akaranga* outlines the strict code of conduct for Jain monks and nuns, though its historical impact stretches far beyond monastic discipline by explicitly introducing *Ahimsa* (absolute non-violence) as the supreme ethical duty. The text contains some of the world's earliest ecological philosophy, meticulously describing how all living entities — including animals, plants and microscopic elements of earth, water, fire and air — possess a soul and feel pain. By codifying these radical principles of non-injury and self-abnegation, *The Akaranga* essentially shaped the spiritual identity of the Jain religion. It helped establish the ascetic rigour and deep reverence for life that continue to define the religion's theology, morality and daily practice to the modern day.



Jain miniature painting of the 24 tirthankaras, Jaipur, c. 1850



Idol of Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara, at Shri Mahavirji temple

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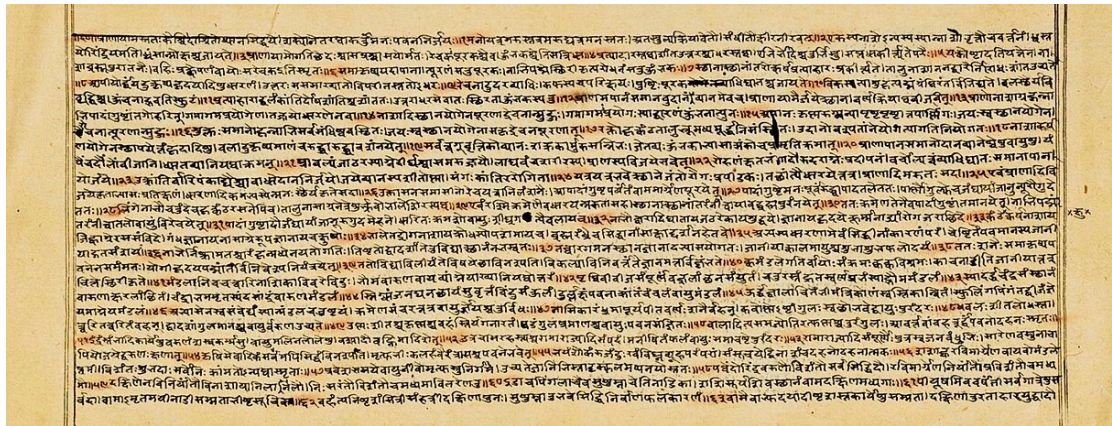
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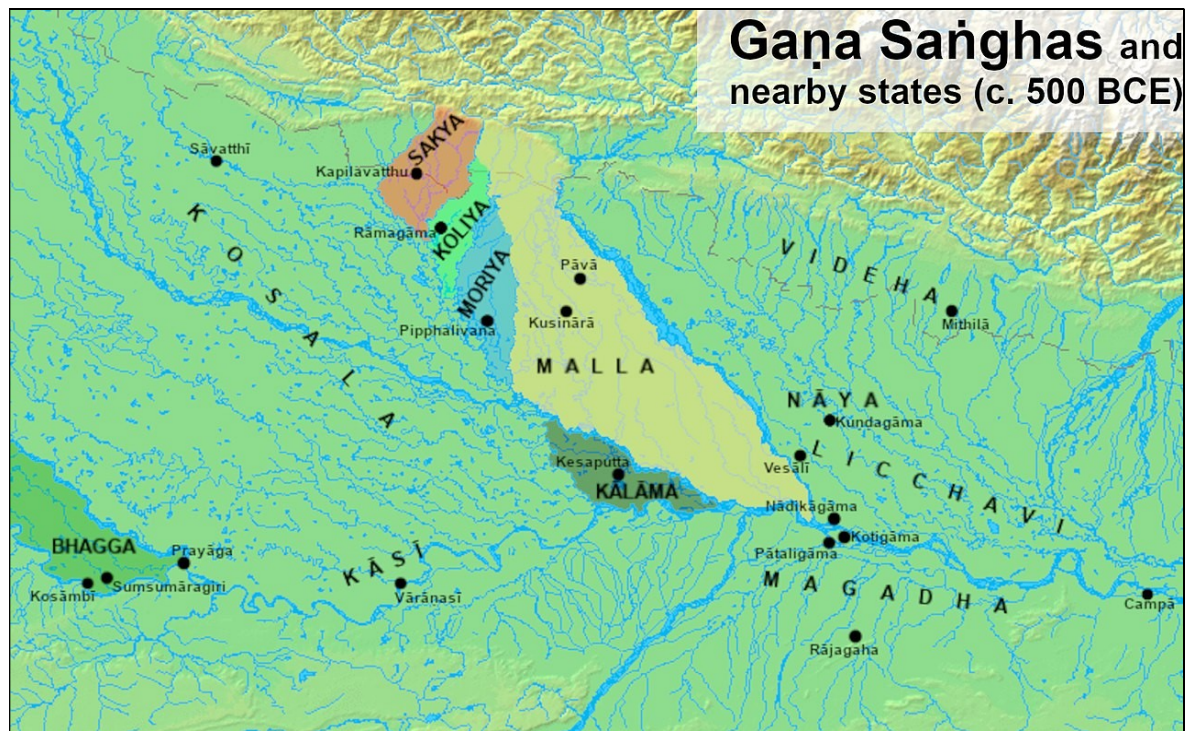
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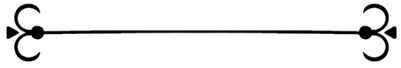


A twelfth-century manuscript of Hemachandra's Yogaśāstra in Sanskrit. The text is notable for using 1 mm miniatu­rized Devanagari script.

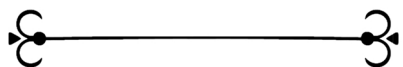


The Gaṇasaṅghas (tribal republics) at the time of Mahavira, c. 500 BC

BOOK I.



**FIRST LECTURE, CALLED KNOWLEDGE OF THE
WEAPON.**





End of Sample