

JAINISM AND INDIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY AND MUSICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the multifaceted contributions of Jainism to Indian civilization, with particular emphasis on its historical evolution, philosophical framework and significant role in the development of Indian musicology. Emerging from the ancient Shramana traditions that developed parallel to and in dialogue with Vedic culture, Jainism articulated a distinctive ethical and metaphysical system grounded in Ahimsa (nonviolence), Anekantavada (multiplicity of viewpoints) and self-discipline (Khalsa-Baker, 2019). Beyond its spiritual and philosophical influence, Jain literature—especially the canonical Agamas and post-canonical treatises—preserves valuable insights into early Indian musical theory. This study critically analyzes references to music in texts such as the Sthananga Sutra, Anuyogadvara Sutra and Sangeeta Samayasara, highlighting their contributions to the classification of instruments, tonal systems and performance aesthetics (Canonical Literature of the Shwetambaras, n.d.). The paper argues that Jainism not only spiritualized artistic expression but also democratized musical knowledge and contributed to the preservation and transmission of India's musical heritage (Swati Gour, n.d.).

Keywords: Jainism, Indian Cultural Heritage, Musical Contributions

Introduction: Antiquity and Identity of Jainism

Jainism is one of the most ancient religious and philosophical traditions of India, rooted in the broader Shramana movement, which emphasized renunciation, asceticism and self-realization (*Bharat De Puratan Dharam - Book By Dr. Harpal Singh Pannu, n.d.*). Rather than viewing it strictly as pre-Vedic or post-Vedic, contemporary scholarship situates Jainism within a complex intellectual milieu where Shramana and Vedic traditions coexisted and interacted.

The term Jain derives from Jina (“conqueror”), referring to one who has overcome inner passions and attained spiritual liberation. Jain philosophy asserts that every jiva (soul) possesses the inherent potential for omniscience (kevala jnana) and liberation (moksha) through disciplined effort, without reliance on a creator deity (Cort, 2002). This emphasis on self-effort and ethical purification distinguishes Jain metaphysics within Indian philosophical discourse (Umesh Joshi, 1957).

Historical Evolution and the Tirthankara Tradition

Jainism is traditionally regarded as an eternal (sanatana) tradition, revealed periodically through the teachings of 24 Tirthankaras (“fordmakers”), who guide beings across the cycle of birth and death (Dundas, 2002).

Early Tirthankaras

Rishabhanatha (Adinatha): Revered as the first Tirthankara, Rishabha is credited in Jain tradition with introducing fundamental arts and social organization. While some interpret references in early Sanskrit literature as indicative of his antiquity, such claims remain interpretative rather than historically conclusive. Jain narratives associate him with the origin of various sciences, including music (gandharva vidya) (Wiley, 2009). Neminatha: Traditionally regarded as a contemporary of Krishna, reflecting the intertextual connections between Jain and broader Indian traditions. Parshvanatha (8th century BCE): A historically more verifiable figure, he systematized the ascetic community and propagated four principal vows—Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya and Aparigraha.

Vardhamana Mahavira (6th century BCE)

The 24th Tirthankara, Mahavira, was born in Vaishali and renounced worldly life at the age of 30. After twelve years of rigorous asceticism, he attained kevala jnana. He expanded Parshvanatha's teachings by formalizing the fifth vow—Brahmacharya—and emphasized a structured ethical path accessible to both ascetics and householders (*The Shapes and Categories of Stavan | Singing to the Jinns: Jain Laywomen, Mandal Singing, and the Negotiations of Jain Devotion | Oxford Academic, n.d.*).

Mahavira's use of vernacular languages (Ardhamagadhi Prakrit) facilitated wider dissemination of his teachings, reflecting a conscious move toward inclusivity.

Sectarian Developments: Shvetambara and Digambara

Around the early centuries of the Common Era, Jainism developed into two principal sects due to differences in monastic practices and scriptural interpretation: Shvetambara: Monks wear white garments and uphold the preservation of canonical Agamas. They affirm the spiritual potential of women for liberation. Digambara: Monks practice complete renunciation, including clothing, symbolizing absolute non-possession. They maintain distinct doctrinal positions regarding liberation and scriptural authenticity. These divisions, however, did not fundamentally alter the core philosophical structure of Jainism.

Core Philosophical Tenets and Ethics

The Triratna (Three Jewels)

The path to liberation is structured through:

1. Samyak Darshan (Right Faith/Perception)
2. Samyak Jnana (Right Knowledge)
3. Samyak Charitra (Right Conduct)

The Five Mahavratas

These vows represent the ethical foundation of Jain life:

- Ahimsa (Nonviolence): Extending to all living beings, including microscopic life.
- Satya (Truthfulness)
- Asteya (Non-stealing)
- Aparigraha (Non-possession)
- Brahmacharya (Celibacy/Chastity)

Among these, Ahimsa is the central organizing principle, influencing Indian ethics, politics and even modern movements.

Anekantavada (Doctrine of Multiplicity)

Anekantavada posits that reality is multifaceted and cannot be fully captured from a single perspective. This epistemological humility is often illustrated through the parable of the blind men and the elephant. The doctrine fosters intellectual tolerance, dialogic engagement and pluralism, making it highly relevant in contemporary philosophical discourse.

Jainism's Contribution to Indian Music

Jainism's engagement with music reveals a sophisticated synthesis of spirituality and aesthetics, challenging the assumption that ascetic traditions reject artistic expression.

Music as a Spiritual Medium

In Jain thought, music is not merely entertainment but a means of inner purification and spiritual elevation. The ethical discipline of the practitioner directly influences artistic expression, reinforcing the idea that sadhana (practice) and sadhuta (purity) are inseparable.

Musicological Insights in Jain Canonical Literature

Jain texts provide valuable early frameworks for understanding Indian music:

Classification of Instruments:

The Sthananga Sutra and Rayapaseniya Sutra classify instruments into:

- Tata (stringed)
- Avanaddha/Vitat (percussion)
- Ghana (idiophones)
- Sushira (wind)

Saptasvaras (Seven Notes):

Jain descriptions of notes integrate physiological, natural and symbolic dimensions, linking sound production to both the human body and natural phenomena.

Grama and Murchana Systems:

References to tonal frameworks such as Shadja, Madhyama and Gandhara gramas, along with multiple murchanas, indicate an early theoretical structure that parallels and possibly informs later treatises like the Natyashastra.

Aesthetics and Performance Theory

The Sthananga Sutra outlines:

- Defects in singing (e.g., instability, excessive speed, nasalization)
- Qualities of good performance (clarity, sweetness, rhythmic precision)

Such discussions demonstrate an early concern for performance standards, pedagogy and aesthetic refinement.

Jain Musical Treatises and Scholars

Sangeeta Samayasar (Parshvadeva, 13th century):

- A comprehensive treatise discussing shruti, raga and tala, reflecting advanced theoretical development.
- Sangeetopanishatsaroddhara (Sudhakalasha):
- An important Shvetambara contribution linking music theory with philosophical insight.

These works position Jain scholars as significant contributors to the codification and transmission of Indian musicological knowledge.

Social Impact: Inclusivity and Cultural Preservation

Jainism played a crucial role in democratizing knowledge systems, including music. By challenging rigid social hierarchies, it facilitated broader access to artistic education.

Jain monks and scholars also preserved regional musical traditions through:

- Devotional compositions (stavans)
- Narrative forms (ras, Prabandha)

Their engagement with deshi (folk) traditions ensured the continuity of local musical cultures, bridging classical and vernacular expressions.

Conclusion

Jainism's contribution to Indian cultural heritage is profound and multidimensional. Philosophically, it offers a rigorous ethical and epistemological framework grounded in nonviolence and pluralism. Historically, it represents a vital strand of the Shramana tradition. Musically, it provides early theoretical insights, promotes ethical aesthetics and preserves diverse traditions. By integrating spirituality with artistic discipline, Jainism redefines music as a form of inner cultivation and universal expression, leaving a lasting imprint on both classical and folk traditions of India.

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