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Q2(c)

Discuss the basic tenets of Jainism and its impact on Indian society.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 marks · Impact of Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity on Indian society.

3.4 Impact of Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity on Indian society.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the basic tenets of Jainism and its impact on Indian society
- State the vows, metaphysics, and social ethic
- Show effects on caste, economy, kingship, and living communities
- Keep doctrine tied to social consequence

Revision summary

Jainism teaches **anekantavada**, karmic bondage of the jiva, and the three jewels of faith, knowledge, and conduct.

Monastic vows centre on ahimsa and aparigraha; householders keep a milder code.

Impact includes vegetarian ethics, mercantile specialisation, and temples at Abu, Palitana, and **Shravanabelagola**.

Caste endogamy continued; occupation was ranked by injury to life.

Gandhi's political ahimsa drew on this Gujarati neighbourhood without making the nation a Jain polity.

Introduction

Jainism is a shramana religion of non-violence, self-restraint, and many-sided truth. Its tenets shaped Indian ethics, diet, trade, and art. Impact is visible in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Karnataka, and in the wider Hindu and Buddhist conversation about ahimsa.

Body

Basic tenets

- Reality is many-sided (**anekantavada**); judgement should be qualified (**syadvada**). This is an ethic of intellectual restraint as well as a logic.
- The soul (**jiva**) is caught in karma as a kind of matter; release is through right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct (the three jewels).
- The **five great vows** for monks are **ahimsa**, **satya**, **asteya**, **brahmacharya**, and **aparigraha**. Householders keep a milder set.
- **Mahavira** (and the earlier tirthankara line culminating in him for the historical period) organised the community; **Digambara** and **Shvetambara** later split on clothing, women's liberation, and canon.

- Extreme care for life produced rules on water, fire, farming, and night travel for monks.

Social and economic impact

- Ahimsa fed vegetarianism and bans on animal sacrifice that also moved Hindu practice, especially in trading towns.
- Aparigraha did not stop wealth. Jain lay families in western India specialised in trade, banking, and later industry, because farming and warfare were ethically harder. **Max Weber** noted this-worldly accumulation with other-worldly restraint.
- Kings such as **Kharavela** (Hathigumpha) and later western Indian patrons funded temples at **Mount Abu**, **Shravanabelagola**, and **Palitana**. Gomateshwara at **Shravanabelagola** is a public monument of Digambara prestige.
- Caste was not abolished. Jain jatis remain endogamous. The ethic ranked occupations by injury to life, which pushed some groups out of butchery and into commerce.

Wider Indian society

- Debate with Buddhism and Brahmanism sharpened ideas of karma, rebirth, and ahimsa that enter the Gita and later bhakti in changed form.
- Legal and constitutional India uses ahimsa as a public value (Directive Principles on cow slaughter are one contested heir). **Gandhi** drew on Jain neighbours in Gujarat for non-violence as a political method, without becoming a Jain monk.
- **Vilas Sangave** and later sociologists describe a small, literate, urban community with high education and strong temple trusts.

Limits

- Jainism did not become a mass peasant church. Its social impact is deep in ethic and trade, not in numbers.
- Women's status differs by sect. Shvetambara tradition allows nuns a fuller path; Digambara classical theory is harsher.

Flow diagram

Three jewels -> Ahimsa satya asteya
 Ahimsa satya asteya -> Diet trade temple
 Anekantavada -> Qualified debate
 Diet trade temple -> Indian ethic and towns

Conclusion

Jain tenets are ahimsa, non-possession, many-sided truth, and karmic release through conduct. They shaped Indian vegetarian ethics, mercantile life, and royal temple art. They did not dissolve caste, and the community remained a small, organised minority with outsized moral influence.

Facts & figures

Anekantavada

Doctrine that reality has many sides, so a single absolute judgement is incomplete.

Five great vows

Ahimsa, truth, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-possession for Jain monks.

Shravanabelagola

Karnataka centre with the Gomateshwara statue, a major Digambara pilgrimage and royal-patronage site.

Hathigumpha inscription

Kharavela of Kalinga records among other acts a Jain-linked royal career in early historic Odisha.

Vilas Sangave

Sociological studies of Jain community organisation, sects, and urban lay life.

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