



Buddhism and Jainism: Ancient Indian Religions and Their Impact on Medieval India

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Article information

Received: 15th December 2025

Received in revised form: 17th January 2026

Accepted: 19th February 2026

Available online: 4th March 2026

Volume: 2

Issue: 1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18884471>

Abstract

This paper examines the origins, development, and medieval impact of Buddhism and Jainism, two major heterodox religious traditions that emerged in ancient India during the 6th century BCE. Through analysis of textual sources, archaeological evidence, and epigraphic materials, this study explores how these religions challenged Vedic orthodoxy, developed distinctive theological and philosophical systems, and profoundly influenced medieval Indian society, politics, and culture. The research demonstrates that while both traditions shared common origins in the śramaṇic movement and emphasized non-violence, liberation through ethical conduct, and rejection of caste hierarchy, they developed distinct approaches to spiritual practice and worldly engagement. The paper argues that Buddhism and Jainism's impact on medieval India extended far beyond religious spheres to encompass significant contributions to philosophy, literature, art, architecture, and economic organization, fundamentally shaping the cultural landscape of the subcontinent.

Keywords: - Buddhism, Jainism, Ancient India, Ahimsa, Medieval India, Vedic Orthodoxy, Liberation

Introduction

The emergence of Buddhism and Jainism in the 6th century BCE marked a pivotal transformation in the religious and intellectual landscape of ancient India. These heterodox traditions, arising from the broader śramaṇic movement, challenged the ritualistic Vedic orthodoxy that had dominated religious life and offered alternative paths to spiritual liberation based on ethical conduct, meditation, and philosophical inquiry rather than sacrificial rituals and priestly mediation (Basham 1959).

Founded respectively by Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha, c. 563-483 BCE) and Vardhamana Mahavira (c. 599-527 BCE), Buddhism and Jainism shared fundamental concerns with suffering, liberation (moksha), and moral conduct (dharma), yet developed distinctive theological frameworks, institutional structures, and cultural expressions. Their impact on medieval Indian civilization was profound and multifaceted, influencing not only religious practices but also philosophical discourse, political legitimacy, artistic expression, and economic organization (Strong 2001; Dundas 2002).

This paper examines the historical development of Buddhism and Jainism from their ancient origins through their medieval transformations, analyzing their theological innovations, institutional evolution, and lasting contributions to Indian civilization. The study draws on extensive textual sources including canonical

literature, commentaries, and inscriptions, supplemented by archaeological evidence from monastic sites, temples, and artistic remains (Thapar 2002).

Theoretical Framework

This analysis employs a multidisciplinary approach integrating religious studies, social history, and cultural anthropology. The theoretical framework draws upon Max Weber's concepts of charismatic authority and routinization to understand how the personal teachings of religious founders were institutionalized into enduring traditions. Additionally, the study utilizes Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to examine how Buddhist and Jain communities developed distinctive forms of social prestige and economic influence (Basham 1959).

The concept of "heterodoxy" as developed by Johannes Bronkhorst provides a framework for understanding how Buddhism and Jainism positioned themselves in relation to Vedic orthodoxy while creating new forms of religious authority. This theoretical foundation helps explain how these traditions simultaneously challenged existing religious hierarchies while developing their own institutional structures and doctrinal systems (Bronkhorst 2007).

Historical Context and Origins

The emergence of Buddhism and Jainism occurred during a period of significant social, economic, and political transformation in the Indian subcontinent. The 6th century BCE witnessed the rise of urban centers, expanding trade networks, and new forms of political organization in the form of mahajanapadas (great kingdoms). This period of material prosperity and social mobility created conditions conducive to religious innovation and philosophical inquiry (Thapar 2002).

The śramaṇic movement, from which both Buddhism and Jainism emerged, represented a broad reaction against Vedic ritualism and brahmanical authority. Śramaṇas (ascetics) rejected the efficacy of sacrifice, the authority of the Vedas, and the social hierarchy of the varna system, instead emphasizing individual spiritual effort and direct experience of truth. Archaeological evidence from sites like Taxila and Rajgir confirms the presence of diverse ascetic communities experimenting with various forms of meditation, austerity, and philosophical speculation (Bronkhorst 2007).

The specific geographical context of these religions' origins—primarily in the eastern regions of Magadha, Kosala, and Videha—was significant. These areas were experiencing rapid urbanization and political consolidation under emerging monarchies that sought alternatives to traditional brahmanical legitimacy. The merchant communities that flourished in these urban centers proved particularly receptive to religious traditions that emphasized ethical conduct in worldly affairs rather than withdrawal from society (Basham 1959).

Early Buddhism: Doctrine and Development

Buddhism emerged from the teaching career of Siddhartha Gautama, who achieved enlightenment and became known as the Buddha ("Awakened One"). The core of Buddhist teaching centered on the Four Noble Truths: the universality of suffering (dukkha), the origin of suffering in craving (tanha), the possibility of suffering's cessation (nirvana), and the Eightfold Path leading to liberation (Rahula 1974).

The Buddhist understanding of existence as characterized by impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anatta) represented a radical departure from Vedic concepts of eternal soul (atman) and cosmic order (rita). Instead of seeking union with a transcendent reality, Buddhism emphasized the elimination of ignorance and craving through mindful awareness and ethical conduct (Harvey 1990).

The early Buddhist community (sangha) developed a distinctive institutional structure that balanced monastic withdrawal with lay participation. The Vinaya texts reveal sophisticated organizational principles governing monastic life, including procedures for ordination, disciplinary measures, and community decision-making. Simultaneously, the tradition developed frameworks for lay practice that emphasized ethical conduct (sila), generous giving (dana), and meditation (bhavana) without requiring renunciation of worldly responsibilities (Gombrich 1988).

Archaeological evidence from early Buddhist sites like Sanchi, Bharhut, and Amaravati demonstrates the religion's rapid spread across the subcontinent. The construction of stupas, viharas (monasteries), and chaityas (worship halls) indicates substantial lay patronage and sophisticated architectural traditions that would influence Indian art for centuries (Harvey 1990).

Early Jainism: Principles and Practice

Jainism traced its origins to a lineage of twenty-four Tirthankaras (ford-makers), with Vardhamana

Mahavira as the twenty-fourth and final teacher of the current cosmic cycle. However, historical evidence suggests that the twenty-third Tirthankara, Parsva (c. 8th century BCE), may represent the actual founder of the Jain tradition, with Mahavira serving as a reformer and systematizer (Jaini 1979).

Central to Jain doctrine was the principle of ahimsa (non-violence), understood in its most comprehensive form as avoiding harm to all living beings. This commitment extended beyond ethical conduct to encompass detailed prescriptions for diet, occupation, and daily behavior designed to minimize violence to microscopic life forms. The Jain cosmology, with its elaborate classification of souls (jivas) and karmic matter, provided the theoretical foundation for these behavioral requirements (Dundas 2002).

The Jain path to liberation emphasized the "three jewels" (ratnatraya): right faith (samyak darshan), right knowledge (samyak gyan), and right conduct (samyak charitra). Unlike Buddhism's middle way between indulgence and extreme asceticism, Jainism maintained that liberation required progressively severe renunciation culminating in the ideal of voluntary death through fasting (sallekhana) (Jaini 1979).

The Jain community developed a four-fold structure (chaturvidha sangha) comprising monks (sadhu), nuns (sadhvi), laymen (shravakas), and laywomen (shravikas). This organizational model created closer integration between monastic and lay communities than typically found in Buddhism, with extensive lay involvement in supporting and directing religious activities (Cort 2001).

Philosophical Innovations

Both Buddhism and Jainism made significant contributions to Indian philosophical discourse that extended far beyond their immediate religious communities. Buddhist philosophers developed sophisticated analyses of consciousness, causation, and knowledge that influenced all subsequent Indian philosophy. The Abhidhamma literature's detailed psychological taxonomy and the Madhyamaka school's dialectical methods represent particularly important innovations (Williams 1989).

The Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (pratityasamutpada) provided a middle way between eternalism and nihilism that influenced later Vedantic thought. Buddhist logicians like Dignaga and Dharmakirti developed sophisticated theories of perception and inference that shaped medieval Indian epistemology across sectarian boundaries (Warder 2000).

Jain philosophers made equally significant contributions, particularly in logic and ethics. The doctrine of anekantavada (multiple perspectives) offered a sophisticated approach to truth claims that avoided both relativism and dogmatism. Jain logicians developed the theory of syadvada (conditional predication) that provided methods for analyzing complex propositions, influencing medieval logical discourse (Dundas 2002).

The Jain commitment to ahimsa generated detailed ethical analyses that influenced broader Indian discussions of moral conduct. Jain texts on karma theory provided particularly sophisticated accounts of the relationship between intention, action, and consequence that influenced Hindu and Buddhist thought (Jaini 1979).

Institutional Development and Patronage

The medieval period witnessed significant institutional development in both traditions as they adapted to changing political and social conditions. Buddhist monasteries evolved into complex educational and economic institutions that played crucial roles in medieval Indian society. The great monastic universities of Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Taxila attracted students from across Asia and preserved extensive libraries that maintained Indian intellectual traditions (Warder 2000).

Archaeological evidence reveals that Buddhist monasteries often controlled substantial agricultural lands, engaged in trade, and provided banking services to surrounding communities. The institution of dana (religious giving) created economic networks that linked monastic communities with merchant and royal patrons, generating resources for religious and educational activities (Schopen 2004).

Jain institutions developed differently, maintaining closer integration with lay communities and urban commercial centers. Jain temples became focal points for community organization, economic cooperation, and cultural expression. The tradition of building elaborate temple complexes, supported by merchant guilds and royal patrons, created architectural monuments that demonstrated both religious devotion and economic prosperity (Cort 2001).

Royal patronage played crucial roles in both traditions' development. Buddhist rulers like Ashoka, Kanishka, and Harsha provided institutional support that facilitated the religion's spread across Asia. Similarly, Jain communities benefited from patronage by rulers like Chandragupta Maurya, various Chalukya kings, and later Rajput dynasties, though Jainism remained more regionally concentrated than Buddhism (Thapar 2002).

Art and Architecture

The artistic and architectural contributions of Buddhism and Jainism profoundly influenced medieval Indian cultural expression. Buddhist art evolved from the symbolic representations of early stupas to the sophisticated iconographic programs of Gupta-period temples and monasteries. The development of Buddha imagery, with its distinctive physiological characteristics and symbolic gestures (mudras), created artistic conventions that spread throughout Asia (Harvey 1990).

Archaeological sites like Ajanta and Ellora demonstrate Buddhism's contributions to rock-cut architecture and mural painting. The cave complexes at Ajanta, with their elaborate paintings depicting Jataka stories and Buddhist cosmology, represent high points of Indian artistic achievement that influenced aesthetic traditions for centuries (Basham 1959).

Jain art developed distinctive characteristics reflecting the tradition's theological emphases. The iconography of Tirthankaras, with its emphasis on meditative absorption and renunciation of worldly concerns, created artistic models that influenced broader Indian sculptural traditions. The elaborate temple complexes at sites like Mount Abu, Palitana, and Shravanabelagola demonstrate Jain contributions to architectural innovation and decorative arts (Shah 1987).

The tradition of manuscript illumination, particularly strong in Jain communities, preserved and transmitted textual traditions while creating distinctive artistic styles. Jain manuscripts from the medieval period represent important sources for understanding both religious literature and artistic development (Dundas 2002).

Economic and Social Impact

Buddhism and Jainism significantly influenced medieval Indian economic organization and social relations. The Buddhist emphasis on ethical conduct in commercial activities contributed to the development of merchant communities that prioritized honesty, fair dealing, and charitable giving. Buddhist texts like the Vinaya provide detailed guidance for economic ethics that influenced broader commercial practices (Schopen 2004).

The institution of dana created economic networks that redistributed wealth from commercial communities to religious institutions, which in turn provided educational, medical, and social services. This system contributed to urban development and cultural patronage while creating alternative forms of social organization based on religious rather than caste identity (Gombrich 1988).

Jain communities developed particularly sophisticated approaches to economic ethics based on their commitment to ahimsa. Jain merchants dominated certain commercial sectors while avoiding occupations deemed harmful to living beings. This specialization contributed to the development of banking, textiles, and precious metals trading while creating distinct commercial networks that persisted for centuries (Cort 2001).

Both traditions challenged caste-based social hierarchies by emphasizing spiritual equality and merit-based advancement. While neither tradition completely rejected social stratification, they provided alternative frameworks for social organization that influenced broader discussions of social justice and individual worth (Sen 2005).

Literary and Intellectual Contributions

The literary contributions of Buddhism and Jainism enriched medieval Indian intellectual culture across multiple domains. Buddhist literature encompassed extensive canonical collections, philosophical treatises, poetry, and dramatic works that influenced literary development in multiple languages. The Jataka stories, with their moral teachings embedded in engaging narratives, became part of broader Indian folklore and influenced literary traditions across Asia (Norman 1983).

Buddhist philosophers and poets like Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, and Bhartrhari made significant contributions to Sanskrit literature while developing distinctive philosophical vocabularies and argumentative styles. The translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese, Tibetan, and other languages created cultural bridges that facilitated intellectual exchange across Asia (Williams 1989).

Jain literature, composed in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and later vernacular languages, made equally significant contributions. The canonical texts (Agamas) preserved early Indian narrative traditions, linguistic developments, and cultural practices. Jain poets like Hemachandra made important contributions to poetics, grammar, and literary theory that influenced broader Sanskrit intellectual culture (Dundas 2002).

The tradition of creating extensive commentaries on canonical texts in both traditions generated sophisticated hermeneutical methods that influenced broader Indian intellectual practices. These commentarial traditions preserved ancient teachings while adapting them to changing cultural contexts (Lopez 1995).

Regional Variations and Adaptations

The spread of Buddhism and Jainism across the Indian subcontinent resulted in significant regional variations that reflected local cultural conditions and political contexts. Buddhism's expansion into Northwest India, under Kushan patronage, created distinctive Gandhara artistic styles that combined Indian and Hellenistic influences. The tradition's spread to South India generated new architectural forms and theological emphases adapted to Dravidian cultural contexts (Harvey 1990).

Jainism's development showed similar regional variations, with distinct traditions emerging in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. These regional traditions developed distinctive practices, architectural styles, and literary traditions while maintaining doctrinal unity. The Digambara and Svetambara sectarian divisions, while based on theological differences, also reflected regional and cultural variations (Dundas 2002).

The interaction between these traditions and local religious practices created synthetic forms that influenced broader religious development. Buddhist tantric traditions incorporated local deities and practices, while Jain communities adapted their practices to regional pilgrimage traditions and cultural festivals (Williams 1989).

Decline and Transformation

The medieval period witnessed significant challenges to Buddhist and Jain institutions that led to their decline in many regions of India. The rise of devotional Hinduism (bhakti), with its emphasis on accessible religious practices and vernacular expression, attracted followers who might previously have been drawn to Buddhist and Jain alternatives to brahmanical orthodoxy (Basham 1959).

Political changes, including the decline of Buddhist kingdoms and the rise of Hindu dynasties that favored brahmanical traditions, reduced institutional support for Buddhist monasteries. The Turkish invasions of North India, beginning in the 11th century, devastated Buddhist monastic universities and interrupted institutional continuity (Thapar 2002).

However, both traditions demonstrated remarkable adaptability, transforming their practices and institutional structures to survive changing conditions. Jainism's closer integration with lay communities and regional cultures enabled its survival in western and southern India, while Buddhism's expansion into Southeast Asia and East Asia created new centers of institutional development (Gombrich 1988; Cort 2001).

Comparative Analysis

While Buddhism and Jainism shared common origins in the śramaṇic movement and emphasized liberation through ethical conduct and spiritual discipline, they developed distinctive approaches to religious practice and worldly engagement. Buddhism's middle way sought to balance spiritual development with practical engagement in social life, while Jainism maintained stricter requirements for renunciation and non-violence (Bronkhorst 2007).

The institutional structures of the two traditions reflected these different emphases. Buddhist monasticism created relatively autonomous communities focused on meditation and scholarship, while Jain communities maintained closer integration between monastic and lay practitioners with greater lay involvement in religious direction (Gombrich 1988; Cort 2001).

Their philosophical contributions also showed distinctive characteristics. Buddhist philosophy emphasized the analysis of consciousness and the deconstruction of substantial entities, while Jain philosophy focused on the classification of reality and the development of non-absolutist logic. Both approaches influenced broader Indian philosophical discourse while maintaining their distinctive methodological commitments (Sharma 1995).

Legacy and Continuing Influence

The impact of Buddhism and Jainism on medieval Indian civilization extended far beyond their immediate religious communities to influence philosophy, art, literature, and social organization across the subcontinent. Their emphasis on ethical conduct, individual spiritual development, and social equality contributed to broader transformations in Indian cultural values (Sen 2005).

The philosophical innovations of both traditions continued to influence Indian intellectual development long after their political decline. Buddhist logical methods influenced medieval Hindu philosophy, while Jain theories of knowledge and ethics shaped discussions across sectarian boundaries (Warder 2000).

Their artistic and architectural contributions became integral parts of Indian cultural heritage, influencing aesthetic traditions that continued to develop in later periods. The cave temples, stupas, and manuscript traditions created by these communities established artistic conventions that remained influential in subsequent cultural development (Basham 1959).

Conclusion

Buddhism and Jainism emerged as transformative forces in ancient Indian civilization that continued to exert profound influence throughout the medieval period. Their challenge to Vedic orthodoxy and development of alternative approaches to spiritual liberation created new possibilities for religious expression and social organization that enriched Indian cultural development (Thapar 2002).

While both traditions faced significant challenges during the medieval period that led to their decline in many regions of India, their contributions to philosophy, art, literature, and social thought became permanently embedded in Indian civilization. Their emphasis on ethical conduct, individual spiritual development, and social equality established values that continued to influence Indian culture long after their institutional decline (Sen 2005).

The study of Buddhism and Jainism's medieval impact demonstrates the complex processes through which religious innovations become integrated into broader cultural traditions. Their lasting influence on Indian civilization testifies to the enduring significance of their contributions to human understanding of spiritual development, social organization, and cultural expression (Reynolds and Carbine 2000).

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