

Jainism: A Schism That Never Was?

A Hypothesis-Driven Reappraisal of Jain History and Identity ¹

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Abstract

This article re-examines the commonly accepted narrative of schism within Jainism, suggesting that what has long been understood as a division between Digambaras and Śvetāmbaras was, in essence, a graceful divergence of two spiritually aligned traditions. Drawing reference from the historic unification of the sanghas of Pārśvanātha and Mahāvīra as chronicled in the *Śrī Uttarādhyayana Sūtra*, this analysis invites readers to re-examine historical milestones through a critical and reflective lens. By synthesizing textual, ritual, and sectarian continuities, it proposes an alternative interpretive hypothesis regarding the emergence of the two primary Jain traditions. Ultimately, this work outlines a conceptual framework for reconciliation, aiming to inspire renewed dialogue toward a unified Jain Church of the future. This article advances a historically informed interpretive hypothesis rather than a definitive historiographical claim.

Introduction

Schism appears to be the inevitable destiny of all religious traditions, an almost certain rite of passage. No matter how exalted the original teachings, they eventually succumb to the all-too-human craving for power and prestige. It is, after all, a time-tested pattern for adherents to diverge from the enlightened path of their seers, not out of misunderstanding, but in the not-so-noble pursuit of ecclesiastical authority, doctrinal superiority, and, of course, personal glory, all conveniently justified in the name of God.

Christianity, once a persecuted movement of humility, love, and the Kingdom of God, transformed after Constantine into an imperial institution, culminating in the Great Schism of

¹ This article is published as a reflective and hypothesis-driven exploration of Jain history and identity. The views expressed are those of the author and are intended to stimulate scholarly dialogue rather than assert final historical conclusions.

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1054. The Church split between Rome and Constantinople, not over Christ's teachings, but over bread (leavened or unleavened), papal supremacy, and liturgical jurisdiction. Similarly, Islam fractured within decades of the Prophet Muhammad's passing along lines of political succession, crystallizing into the Sunni–Shia divide. Caliphates rose and fell in the Prophet's name, while dynasties like the Umayyads and Abbasids turned the caliphal office into personal dominions fraught with intrigue and occasional fratricide.

Even Buddhism, often cherished as a serene presence within the world's spiritual family, could not remain united. Within 400–500 years after the Buddha, disagreements about doctrine and monastic discipline birthed the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, each convinced that their particular interpretation of "no-self" had more spiritual self-worth than the others. Across traditions, the pattern repeats: founders teach renunciation, unity, and compassion; followers discover division, hierarchy, and orthodoxy. Revelation gives way to real estate, ideological or literal, managed by those who allowed self-interest to dominate.

Jainism and the Question of Division

Jainism, with its rigorous asceticism, fastidious non-violence, and philosophical depth, might appear immune to the usual theatrics of religious schism. After all, how much power-jockeying can occur among people who won't even swat a mosquito? Yet history suggests otherwise. Within a few centuries after Mahāvīra, Jainism appears to have divided into Digambara and Śvetāmbara traditions, allegedly over something as superficial as clothing. *Saman Suttam* (Sūtra 142) emphasizes detachment from possessions as the cornerstone of non-attachment. Yet nudity gradually emerged as a decisive criterion for liberation in the Digambara tradition. For what is cloth to one who seeks to shed the ego that

clings? And yet, the outward came to overshadow the inward, and the sacred unity was split, not by wisdom, but by the shadow of form.

142. जे ममाइय मतिं जहाति, से जहाति ममाइयं । से हु दिट्ठपहे मुणी, जस्स नत्थि ममाइयं ॥३॥

जो परिग्रह की बुद्धि का त्याग करता है, वही परिग्रह को त्याग सकता है। जिसके पास परिग्रह नहीं है, उसी मुनि ने पथ को देखा है।

One who detaches himself from the desire to possess, he alone achieves non-possessiveness. Seeker who has achieved non-possessiveness has seen the path.

Sutta# 142, Saman Suttam

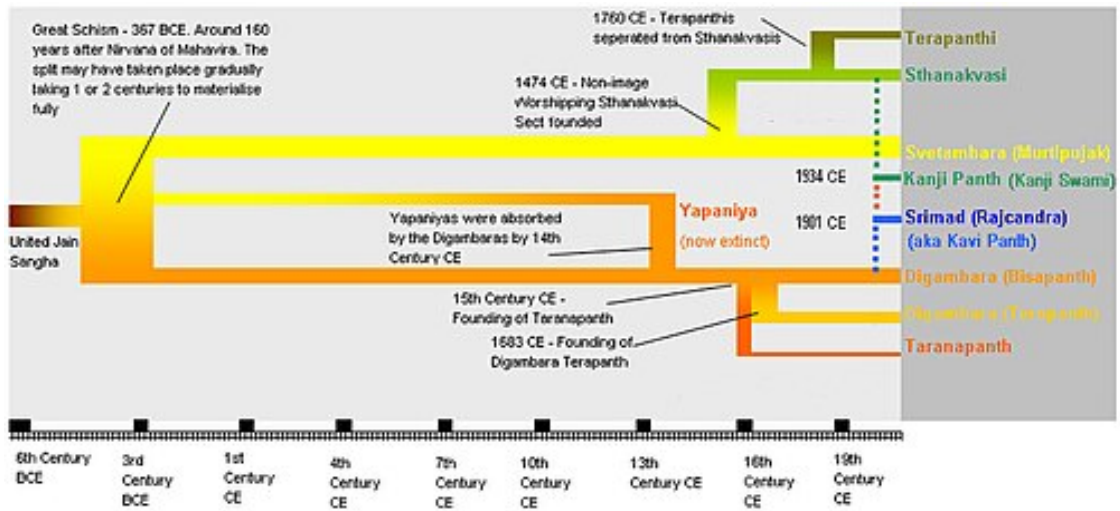
This raises an unsettling question: *Can the presence or absence of cloth truly fracture a tradition grounded in the annihilation of ego?* Or does this narrative merely veil deeper undercurrents—subtle assertions of identity, lineage, and authority? Historians, in their measured voices, seem certain. They speak of doctrinal distinctions, of divergent interpretations etched into the annals of time, as if annals and garments together bore the weight of separation.

Perhaps the truth lies beneath the surface, not in visible facts, but in the unseen tensions that existed from the days of Mahāvīra. Perhaps it was not the cloth, nor the scriptures, but the subtle rise of identity itself, that age-old pull of 'mine' versus 'yours', which, though refined, can still haunt even the most ascetic of paths. Let us, then, pause and delve more deeply into this crisis of identity, a rupture not merely in practice, but in the very self-understanding of a tradition.

Jainism Before Mahāvīra: A Shared Foundation

All Jain sects affirm that Jainism did not originate with Mahāvīra. Rather, it affirms a lineage that stretches far beyond recorded history, into epochs lost to time. Mahāvīra is revered not as

a founder but as the 24th Tīrthāṅkara, the most recent revealer of an eternal dharma. Another significant point of convergence between all the Jain sects is the recognition that, during Mahavira's time, there already existed an established *Shramana* Church, the followers of Parshvanatha, the 23rd Tirthankara, a figure whose historicity is broadly accepted by modern historiography. This earlier community, with its own ascetic code, lay network, and spiritual rhythm, was not a marginal group, but a well-structured spiritual order that had persisted for generations prior to Mahavira's ministry.



Far from being marginal, this community possessed its own ascetic discipline, lay networks, and spiritual continuity. For a time, the followers of Pārśva and the disciples of Mahāvīra coexisted as parallel currents. Their metaphysical foundations were shared, belief in the soul, karma, saṃvara, and nirjarā, yet their ascetic disciplines differed. The *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* (Chapter 23, Verse 13) explicitly notes this distinction: Mahāvīra's disciples renounced clothing entirely, while Pārśva's ascetics wore fine, multi-coloured garments. Despite these differences, mutual respect prevailed.

अचेलगो य जो धम्मो, जो इमो सन्तरुत्तरो।

एगकज्ज—पवज्जाणं, विससे किं नु कारणं ? ॥ १३ ॥

भगवान् वर्द्धमान ने यह अचेलक धर्म (वस्त्ररहित व अल्प वस्त्र वाला) बताया है जबकि भगवान् पार्श्वनाथ ने सान्तरुत्तर—(रंग-बिरंगे व मूल्यवान् वस्त्रों वाला) धर्म की प्ररूपणा की है। एक ही लक्ष्य के लिए प्रवृत्त साधकों में यह भेद क्यों है ? ॥ १३ ॥

Bhagavan Vardhamaan has prescribed this Achelak (sky-clad or meagerly clad) religion; while Bhagavan Parshvanaath has prescribed religion with multi-coloured and costly garbs. Pursuing the same end, why these differences for the aspirants ? (13)

एवं तु संसर्ग छिन्ने, केसी घोरपरक्कमे।
अभिवन्दिता सिरसा, गोयमं तु महायसं ॥ ८६ ॥

इस प्रकार सभी संशयों के नष्ट होने पर घोर पराक्रमी केशी ने महायशस्वी गौतम को शिर से वन्दना कर-सिर झुकाकर— ॥ ८६ ॥

Thus when all doubts were removed, unwaveringly resolute Keshi bowed down his head to pay homage to widely famed Gautam. (86)

पंचमहव्वयधम्मं, पडिवज्जइ भावओ।
पुरिमस्स पच्छिमंमी, मग्गे तत्थ सुहावहे ॥ ८७ ॥

प्रथम और अन्तिम जिनों द्वारा उपदेशित एवं सुखकारी पंचमहाव्रत रूप धर्म को भाव सहित स्वीकार किया ॥ ८७ ॥

He then accepted, with heartfelt devotion, the beatific religion of five-vows as propagated by the first and the last Jinas. (87)

A Rare Confluence of Spiritual Lineages

Gradually, the followers of *Pārśvanātha* came to recognize *Mahāvīra* not as a heretic but as the destined 24th Tīrthaṅkara. This recognition, peaceful, voluntary, and reverential, is extraordinary in religious history. Where Jesus was crucified and Muhammad exiled, Mahāvīra was embraced. This was no ordinary event. Rarely does it ever happen when an established authority willingly gives away its suzerainty in favour of a new creed. Say, for example, take the case of Jesus and the treatment He received from the old school – abuse, humiliation, and merciless execution on the Cross. Another example is that of Prophet Mohammed, who was exiled from His hometown of Mecca and forced to take refuge in Medina. History is full of such examples. From Socrates to Osho, whenever any seer tried to bring a new idea, he was humbled and humiliated and silenced. But India was different, and the followers of Parshava were the most honest of the spiritual seekers who not only acknowledged the Seer, but willingly transcended from the old school to the new and in the process, fulfilled their own prophecy of the coming of their 24th Grand Master.

43. तम्हा सव्वे वि णया, मिच्छादिट्ठी सपक्खपडिबद्धा । अन्नोन्नणिसिया उण, हवन्ति सम्मत्तसम्भावा ॥१२॥

अतः (समझना चाहिए कि) अपने-अपने पक्ष का आग्रह रखने-
वाले सभी नय मिथ्या हैं और परस्पर सापेक्ष होने पर वे ही
सम्यक्भाव को प्राप्त हो जाते हैं।

**Thus, it should be understood that all the View-points (nayas), as long
as they confine to their own respective stand-points are false (Mithya),
but when they corelate with each others point-of-view, they become
wholesome (samyak).**

Sutta#43, Saman Suttam

This confluence of the Churches of Pārśva and Mahāvīra, with no commonality other than a shared pursuit of spiritual awakening, offers a model for what is possible when ego does not overshadow the common good. It's something that we Jains today need to emulate if we desire to create a Unified Jain Church. Crucially, this unified Jain Church was *heterogeneous from its inception*. Unlike monolithic religious formations elsewhere, Jain unity emerged through pluralism, a convergence of distinct communities bound by a shared spiritual pursuit rather than uniform practice.

Rethinking “Schism” as Organic Divergence

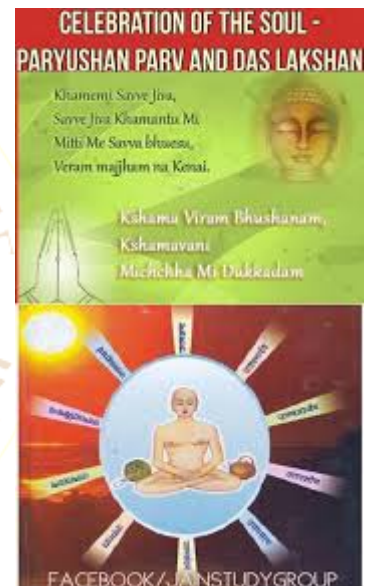
The confluence of the two communities and their coming together (*payushna*) was organic, facilitated by the presence of the magnet of a living Tirthankara, whose very nature (*lakshna*) dissolves the boundaries of ego. And thus, the diffuence of these communities should also be understood as organic, a gradual path where over time they took their own course of action, and not a sudden divorce where some people overnight, for no apparent reason, started to wear clothes and thus were ostracised as corrupt.

From Mahāvīra's lifetime, two distinct communities existed, one following Pārśva, the other drawn to Mahāvīra. These were not rival factions, but seekers drawn by the gravity of a spiritual sun, by the silent, immovable magnet of Mahavira's awakened being. His presence

did not homogenize them, nor dissolve their unique temperaments. Instead, it illuminated the path for both, holding their differences in a greater unity of purpose. Thus, we may posit, as a working hypothesis grounded in customs and traditions, that upon Mahavira's *nirvāṇa*, the two currents that had gathered around Him, each shaped by its own spiritual disposition and historical context, naturally resumed their respective trajectories. Freed from the centripetal force of the Tirthankara's embodied presence, these communities began to express their reverence and continuity in divergent yet equally sincere ways.

Festivals as Living Memory: A Hypothesis

It may further be hypothesised that as the followers of Parshava realised their mistake and decided to declare Mahavira as the destined 24th Tirthankara, they would have first atoned for their mistake by fasting, and then on Samvatsari, the most auspicious day of their Calendar, celebrated on the 50th day of the rainy season, went ahead and merged with the Church of Mahavira. This coming-together with Mahavira would then have been celebrated generation after generation and eventually crystallised as the festival of *Payushna-Parva* celebrated by the Svetambara Jains today.



The declaration of Mahavira as the destined Tirthankara would have been a big day for the immediate disciples of Mahavira. Their master was being vindicated as the 24th Tirthankara of the great Shramana tradition. The depth of the gravity of this declaration could be better understood by realizing that competing for this recognition were the likes of Gautama, The Buddha, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambali, Purna Kashyapa, Pakudha Kaccayana and Sanjaya Belatthaputta. All of the above were equally illustrious Shramana Seers, with their

own set of followers who apparently believed that their master was the destined Shramana Tirthankara.

Among all of these exceptionally illustrious persons, Mahavira was declared as the destined Tirthankara, a recognition that deserved massive celebrations. And that's what would have happened. The immediate disciples would have celebrated the qualities, The *Lakshana* they foresaw in Mahavira, which led them into becoming His followers in the first place. These celebrations would have started on *Samvatsari* when Mahavira would have been officially declared as the destined Tirthankara by the Church of Parshava, the torchbearers of the legacy of the 23rd Tirthankara. The original disciples of Mahavira would have then continued celebrations for nine more days to commemorate the ten qualities they foresaw in Him. Probably, it's this practice which, over time, crystallised into the festivities of *Dasa-Laksna* celebrated by Digambara Jains today.

Sectarian Continuities and Historical Evidence

Further support for this hypothesis emerges from Śvetāmbara history itself. Upkeśa Gaccha is the oldest gaccha (monastic order) of Śvetāmbara Jainism. It is one of the 84 gacchas of the Śvetāmbara sect that were once in existence. Unlike most



other gacchas that follow Mahavira's lineage and begin with his disciple Sudharmaswami, it follows the lineage of the 23rd Tirthankara Parshvanatha and is said to have begun with his prime disciple Ganadhara Shubhadatta. It went extinct in about 1930 CE.³ Acharya Ratnaprabhasuri is the prime disciple of Swayamprabhasuri and the most prominent of the monks of this monastic lineage. His monastic lineage is known as Upkeśa Gaccha as a result of his efforts in abolishing animal sacrifice at Osian in 457 BC. He also founded the Oswal

³ Indian Antiquary: *A Journal of Oriental Research*, Vol-19, Issue no.-January–December.

clan. Today, nearly four-fifths of Śvetāmbaras belong to this clan. As a result of that, he is the most celebrated monk of this lineage. His footprints are worshipped at the Vimal Vasahi at Dilwara Temples.⁴ Interestingly, the maximum number of Parshva temples that we have today are also concentrated in the Rajasthan-Gujarat regions with 68 being in Gujarat and 31 in Rajasthan.⁵ This historical continuity of the community, along with historical evidence in the form of ancient temples, indicates that Oswals inherit their religious tradition from the lineage of Parsava and the last Acharaya of this tradition.

Conclusion: Unity Without Uniformity

Viewed through this hypothesis, the Jain “schism” was never a schism, there was no homogeneous community to begin with. The Unified Jain Church under Mahāvīra was a confluence of like-minded seekers, united in pursuit yet diverse in approach. As Mahāvīra passed into nirvāṇa, this legacy continued, yielding diverse institutions that evolved into the Jain Churches we see



today. The path to a unified Jain Church mirrors Mahāvīra’s original vision: unity in pursuit, pluralism in practice. Like Acharya Kesi, the acharyas of the various sects and sub-sects of Jain orders today need to converge and learn to celebrate this unity in diversity. Let’s awaken this eternal pulse of Anekantvada, not as a philosophy to scratch our heads, but as a doctrine to be practiced. Let’s converge for a common cause, to hold high the flag of ahimsa and spread its gospel around the world. United, we should stand under one *Shramanacharya*, manifold in form, yet one in essence. Let’s dissolve into one, as a symphony of diverse traditions playing the same tune of *Samvar* and *Nirjara*.

⁴ Lodha, J. C. (2013). *History Of Oswals*. Jain Chanchalmal Lodha.

⁵ <https://www.scribd.com/document/871168652/108-1>