

A Jain perspective on food, fasting and liberation

Non-violence as a core philosophy and a vegetarian diet as one of its outcomes are the two most well-known aspects of the Jain community. Practicing Jains from all sects and subsects are strict vegetarians. Jains who are engaged in any kind of active spiritual pursuit will even avoid vegetables which grow underground and animal-derived foods such as honey or dairy products.

Though exact diet may vary, vegetarianism is often an object of asserting social and traditional identity for Jains.

An overview of changing attitudes towards food

Ancient Indians, including the Vedic people, ate animals and animal products. From a historical perspective, the relationship of the Vedic people with the natural world including animals have been guided by a pastoral lifestyle. For example, cattle have been praised from the earliest Vedas and have over time gathered more strict ritual significance. On the other hand, animal sacrifice is a component of early Vedic practices. There are also specific merits associated with sharing food and especially the sanctified meat of sacrificed animals. Food was ritualized and also associated with celebrations. Eventually, access to such foods and sacrificial material also determined one's place in society. The priestly *brahmins*, by their authority over diet and rituals, commanded some social and material clout.

Not all Vedic *brahmins* were priests. Many *brahmins* were simply scholars, others were renunciants who lived in huts outside society and performed fire rituals, and there were wandering ascetics similar to *sramanas* who forsook all belongings except some simple clothing and a few personal items such as a begging bowl or articles of religious use. The renunciant

brahmins would often gather food by begging or from the forest.



Over time, various ethnic and religious groups became vegetarian and vegetarianism became a matter of spiritual purity even amongst laypeople. Through much of history, *sramana* religions such as Jainism and Buddhism has played a role in this transition.

In contemporary India, many cultural groups including some categories of *brahmins* and a vast majority of other people do eat different kinds of non-vegetarian food. However, much of the staple food for even non-vegetarians is essentially plant matter. The idea of having a portion of meat as the central item and some small portions of sides to accompany that is a relatively young idea in India; it is limited to small groups of people. There still are more vegetarians in India than in all other countries, combined.

***Sramana* opposition to the *brahmin* view of castes**

Early indigenous literature from both *sramana* and *brahmin* schools explicitly recognized the many shared or comparable features and concepts, but also clearly identified each other

as rival philosophical systems. *Sramana* religions [opposed the priestly brahmins](#) and the Vedic caste system.

Over time, the caste system is thought to have become somewhat established along the lines of birth. Unlike *brahmins*, the *sramanas* allowed renunciates from all castes. *Sudras* and those outside the caste system had much more agency under the *sramanas*.

In the Jain worldview, there is no creator-god and animal sacrifices have negative consequences. Souls, however, are potentially divine, possessing singular knowledge and capable of attaining liberation from a cycle of birth, death and reincarnation. For the *sramanas*, aspects like birth, gods, society, wealth or anything outside one's own agency cannot meaningfully hinder spiritual access as long as the philosophies and ethics are followed properly. For Jains in particular, diet is one major indication of such ethical excellence.

The philosophies behind Jain food

Food mostly has no ritual significance for a Jain. It is viewed merely as the physical materials needed to sustain one's own body. These materials are thought to contain souls within them. In fact, Jain thinkers speak of souls at different stages of growth not only in various categories of animals, but also in plants, in microscopic life-forms and in physical substances in their natural state, such as water and earth.

Thus, all beings who acquire food directly or indirectly cause fear, damage and death to other beings. This is problematic from a Jain perspective because violence of any kind is thought to bind the soul to existence. However, because of realistic limitations, the Jain worldview allows the minimal violence that is inevitably committed towards some plants and microbes. In any case, from the Jain perspective, violence towards animals and higher beings for food can be avoided.



Amongst the *sramanas*, there are many injunctions related to food and eating which goes beyond a mere list of permissible edibles. Ascetics in particular are ideally expected consume cooked food and water that has been boiled and strained by laypeople and given willingly. The food is also to be ideally gathered from leftovers and from multiple houses to prevent shortages; this also prevents any undue favour or attachment towards any particular household. Food must never be eaten after sunset to ensure that it is not contaminated with small beings. Some of these rules also set *sramanas* apart from Vedic ascetics, who often either begged for, gathered or cooked their own food, and some of whom ate after sunset.



Of all the various impulses that cause a soul to be ensnared in the world, the desire to consume and more specifically the desire to eat are thought to be amongst most primal ones. This aspect of life is often a cause for philosophical, mythical and social concern to Jains. Hence, the Jain diet looks to *restrict* rather than *prescribe* how one should gather food and what one should eat.

Mythical indicators of historical diets

In the earliest available Jain literature which trickles down from a few centuries before the common era, the regulations for being a Jain ascetic or layperson were less strict. Over time, the regulations became more specific. Manuals about suitable food and elaborate protocols for laypeople as well as ascetics seem to be present from at least the 11th century CE onwards.

Despite some scholarly controversy around early Jain diets, the primary and only surviving view of Jain food is characterized by strict frugal vegetarianism and a preoccupation with removing microbes.

Jain mythologies threaded around the subject of food exemplify

the Jain diet and often serve as cautionary tales against the consumption of animals and animal products. There are tales where eating meat leads to cannibalism and descriptions of hells for such sins. There are tales of how both real and metaphorical hungers can persist in a soul over many lifetimes. There are tales around Jain figures being given suitable food by virtuous laypeople. Even Jain sects are divided on the subject of whether an enlightened human being still has the need to eat or not.

The *sramanas* often morally distinguished themselves from *brahmins* on the basis of the more rigorous non-violence contained within their own food practices. Historically, the Jains and Buddhists were often responsible for stopping animal sacrifice and restricting animal slaughter. Jains in particular are critical of even Buddhist diet, where the strictness of vegetarianism varies by sect, geographical region and the state of being a layperson or an ascetic.

A Jain view of fasting

In Jainism, instead of food, fasting takes on a magical or ritualistic aspect. The elaborate rules about food merely ensure that one has a system to gradually eat as little as one can; not eating prevents new violences and entanglements.

The Jain focus on fasting becomes clearer when one looks at the examples and reasoning provided within Jain literature. Mahavira himself is said to have fasted for extraordinarily long periods, and fasting is a critical part of Jain spiritual pursuit. Jain festivals [incorporate fasting as a central element](#) as does all of Jain mythology.

Meditative fasting itself is said to generate inner spiritual heat, which quickens the process ripening and dissolution of existing bondages of the soul. Often, the merit of various good actions are measured by scaling them against the merit one would acquire by fasting for a number of days.

Even amongst contemporary Jain laypeople, frequent or occasional fasting is very common as a part of tradition, spiritual practice and routine life.

Food and the spread of Jainism

Compared to other religions, Jain ethical and dietary regulations seem intimidating to many. Over time, this perception has taken a toll on its popularity. Moreover, the broader reach of Jainism has been relatively restricted because Jain ascetics have historically been limited in their wandering on foot and teaching only in those regions where suitable edibles are available. Jain ascetics often prefer fasting or even starvation to death over unfit food or drink.



Through Jain history, the spread of Jainism has been closely related with the flourish of lay patrons of Jainism. This was clearly critical to Jains; there are anecdotes and myths which indicate the dedication of kings and traders towards fostering a suitable laity so that Jain monks, who are epitomes of dedication to the Jain ideal, can travel and preach. This is markedly different from the category of food myths in other religions where proper food may be made available by some

divine or miraculous agency.

The exact rules and vows of gathering food have slight variations, but ascetics from all sects depend on suitable food given specifically by virtuous laypeople. These laypeople are usually understood to be people from within the Jain community or in some cases it may include anyone who meets certain ethical criteria. The conflation of ethics, diet and the qualification of laypeople eventually has had the effect of creating social hierarchy that mirrors the *brahmin* worldview.

A *sramana* view of diet and caste

Though the *sramanas* philosophically opposed the *brahmin* view of castes, the actual relationship between the *sramanas* and Hindu society is quite nuanced and is entangled with food practices.

The *sramanas* from Mahavira and Buddha's time onwards often describe society in *brahmin* terms. Prominent *sramana* leaders of the time are said to have come primarily from the *kshatriya* and secondarily from amongst *brahmins* themselves. In fact, anecdotes and historical figures of converted *brahmins* are plentiful. These reflect the rivalry between the *brahmins* and other upper classes and the inner dissonance amongst *brahmins* themselves in Vedic society.

The earliest extant Jain literature often appeals to good *sramanas* and *brahmins* to adhere to ethics and a meditative life. Similarly, in *sramana* mythology, Hindu gods often attend to the *sramana* teachers and assist them in different ways. There are heavens reserved for non-believers who adhere to certain ethical precepts even with certain faults in worldview. This ultimately indicates a willingness on the part of the *sramana* to accommodate both faith and individuals from the very social order that they denounced and questioned.



Thus, while the *sramanas* do question the basis of social hierarchy and order, they do tacitly agree that people following the most ethical actions have the highest place in society and thus a social order exists on that basis.

In case of Jains, this distinction is codified through diet. There is a sharp disapproval of those who cause injury to living beings and consume meat and animal products, often on the broad basis of profession. As a result, a strong social and cultural overlap is found with the *brahmins* who also often exalt vegetarianism. On the other hand, it also creates a shared disdain amongst Jains and Hindu *brahmins* about lower castes who work with animal products or consume meat, fish and eggs.

A softer world

This worldview should be understood in the context that despite clarifying a basis for social order and outlining indications of moral virtue, ethical instructions in the *sramana* system ultimately clearly exalt human beings. According to *sramanas*, all human beings are to be treated with thoughtful kindness, and no violence, direct or indirect, is

to be allowed and ultimately any human has a greater chance of liberation than other beings.

Jain ascetics depend on Jain laypeople and Jain laypeople depend on non-Jains. This dependence is also encoded through the ambiguous indirect violence that is inevitably associated with food and eating.

Since Jain ascetics are advised to not ask for anything, including food, the Jain laity are expected to offer food to ascetics on their own. The laity are also expected to understand the strict codes of how food should be prepared, what food can be given to ascetics, under what conditions and how.



The violence in the act of cooking and its mild consequence is shifted from the ascetic to the layperson, and more specifically to the women who cook the food. Similarly, Jain laity are not expected to pursue agriculture and the slight consequence for the violence of tilling soil or for harvesting produce is shifted to non-Jain peasants.

In the Jain view of society, both non-Jains who provide food

as well as Jain laywomen who actually maintain the kitchen take a philosophical backseat.

Women, food and Jainism

The role of women in many Indic cultures have been a subject of tumult and controversy throughout history and it remains so in the present day. By Mahavira and Buddha's time, the social position of women had become somewhat unfavourable, and their access to philosophy and religion was often restricted. Compared to Vedic society, women within the *sramana* traditions had more agency and equality. Irrespective, Jain mythology has a somewhat secondary place for women, especially in the area of asceticism.

However, women play a culturally significant role. Especially in contemporary Jain society, women are the keepers of the lay rituals, and often perform fasts and follow festivals and penances more rigorously than men do. This is especially true because of traditional division of gender roles, where Jain women are able to stay home and pursue the faith more deeply.

Jain women are also expected to know how to prepare food in accordance with the Jain tenets. These skills, familiarity with tradition and the depth of their religious devotion are often thought of as indicators of the piety of the entire family.



In each Jain family, therefore, it is usually the women who are responsible for the preservation of the Jain practice and identity through the agencies of food, festivals and fasting. Significantly, the cooked, permissible food that is given by a layperson to the ascetic is also controlled by the women in a household. This particular food, as we discussed briefly earlier, is a critical link in Jain society.

Thus, it may be said that Jain women are the keepers of Jain culture in general and uphold the grammar of food in particular, which in turn is critical to the Jain understanding of social order.

Contemporary conflicts with other communities

In India in general, food is still entangled with religion, society and politics in a way that lies far outside its value as the mere source of physical nourishment.

Historically, the *sramanas* are responsible for getting suitable non-violence and food-related enforcements through the agency of patron kings and states. For example, Buddhist philosophies led Ashoka to implement benevolent rules for all animals and plants in his kingdom, and Jains played a hand in

tempering Akbar's treatment towards animals and for getting animal slaughter banned in certain areas during certain holy periods.

While the *sramanas* are understood to have caused a certain balancing of food habits in the subcontinent, their approaches do not always translate easily during contemporary times. Recently, Jains have played a role in some controversial bans and obstructions to the food eaten by non-Jains. These *sramana* practices and efforts often stem from philosophical grounds of compassion towards animals or sometimes from a sense of moral righteousness. Ritual sacredness of animals or even an affront against other identity groups do not usually drive these ideas. Irrespective of intentions, the social and political implications cannot be ignored.

Often, affordable meat and eggs are a rich source of protein and nourishment for the poorest segments of Indian society. More significantly, specific foods contain historically significant cultural value for most groups of people. Interference with such matters entails cultural and social overreach. This is problematic not only from a non-Jain view, but also from a Jain perspective which recommends against violence in thought, speech and action; forcible imposition of one's worldview on other people is quite outside the Jain way of life. Moreover, the disdain towards meat eaters sometimes has led to controversial social behaviours, such as the ostracization of non-vegetarians by some Jain societies.



Another source of oddly specific misunderstandings stems from some of the overlaps of the Jain and the vegan diet. This is a superficial similarity, and the motivations, methods, outcomes, pragmatic considerations and the sociocultural fits for both diets are different. It is unfair to both communities to yoke them together casually.

Despite these problematic issues, the Jain approach to food resonates deeply with large-scale problems of today.

Food, environment and Jainism

In Jain philosophy, there are elements that indicate ecological understanding, but it is not appropriate to posit that Jainism and contemporary scientific or political environmentalism as essentially the same.

The scientific views and sensitive political interests seek to gracefully preserve the world while Jain ethics seek to gracefully liberate an individual from the world. The behavioural outcomes of both views, however, converge favourably. Many progressive contemporary Jains find a natural alliance with activists who work on ecological issues or those who promote sustainable lifestyles.



Contemporary crises of food and agricultural practices include severely faulty distribution, wastage and an immense ecological as well as individual impact. India is a contributor, but many practices by affluent nations highlight the problems with heavy agriculture and industry. For example, the mechanized meat and agriculture industries especially as established in many affluent nations are thought to be amongst the leading causes of climate change which in turn is considered to be the greatest ecological crisis facing the world today.

These industries, whether built around plant or animal matter, are exceedingly cruel towards animals, which are killed either because they are considered pests or because they are considered objects of harvest. Monocultures and systematic animal farming also eventually have negative effects on society. Moreover, meat-heavy diets are observed to have negative effects on individual health.

There are many progressive Jains who draw from their cultural sensitization and work on local and sustainable food and agriculture and oppose potentially hazardous practices like

genetic modification of food by corporations, industrial farming and especially the animal product and meat industries.

A meaningful meal

Jainism, however, is not just about its restrictions, dietary or otherwise. It has a rich inner philosophy, a sophisticated way of viewing the world and significant practical outcomes driven by its ethical system. Even looking at contemporary society without the explanations offered by Jainism, it is not difficult to understand that excesses of various kinds are the root of private and social troubles. Even leading secular thinkers today harp on the the seemingly religious notes of thoughtfulness, restraint and ethical actions that avoid causing suffering to others.



The soul and its liberation and their relationships with food are matters of faith, of private experience, of religious practice and of contemplative debate. However, one perspective to consider is that thoughtful eating may free a person from economic pressures fuelled by excess or expensive food, from the negative ecological effects of heavy agriculture and from the poor health created by unbalanced diets and synthetic

eatables.

Little can be said of liberation *from* this world, but policies of the plate may be a key factor to liberation *within* this world.

—

Text and images: Anveshan

[Please click here for a list of references for this subject.](#)