

JAIN THEISM AND GUṆĀNUVĀDA

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Abstract

God and godhood are the basis of all philosophies in the world. Jainism also has its parameters to define God. More importantly, it believes that a soul can attain godhood itself. For that, some attributes are required to be attained to their full potential. This is the reason for the devotees to flock to the temples and praise the Jain God. Praising the person for his attributes is *guṇānuvāda* in the Jain tradition which sets it apart from many other traditions. This paper discusses the concepts of God and godhood in Jainism without delving into the types of Gods in Jainism, but God in general.

Keywords: Theism; Guṇānuvāda; Atheism; Bhakti; Jain devotion

Introduction

Jainism is considered one of India's atheistic religions. Phrases such as "The Jains are explicitly atheistic" (James 578), are commonplace. Anyone spending time with Jains and discussing their religion with them is sure to come across two things: Claims of atheism and many references to God. The claim to atheism and the references to God come from laypersons, monks, teachers, and preachers, and can be found in just about any book on Jainism, canonical texts included (see: Joshi 199-200). This paper seeks to explore 'atheism' in a religion where in practice and theory, in the literature, in the temple, and in the household, there is not just God, but also icons, prayer, *pūjā*, *bhakti*, and all manner of fervent ritualism. 'Atheism' turns out to be a messy and relative term, and perhaps Jainism is better categorized as a unique type of theism. Pulling from the term *guṇānuvāda*, meaning 'worship of the qualities', which is a central concept in Jain ritual, their ideology can be termed as *guṇānutheism* as a step in the direction of clarifying the nature of divinity in Jainism.

Basics of Jain Theism

Before any attempt to categorize Jainism as theism or atheism, a brief explanation of the Jain concept of divinity is in order. In Jainism, the soul is called the *jīva*. A few of the *guṇas* or qualities possessed by each *jīva* naturally and intrinsically are infinite knowledge (*ananta-jñāna*), infinite perception/faith (*ananta-darśana*), infinite energy/capability/power (*ananta-vīrya*), and infinite bliss (*ananta-sukha*). These are known as the four divine *guṇas*.¹ "Jains

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¹ kṣāyikānantadṛgbodhasukhavīryādibhirguṇaiḥ |
yukto'sau yoginām gamyaḥ sūkṣamo'pi vyaktalakṣaṇaḥ || (*Ādipurāna*-I 21.114)

speak of the ‘innumerable qualities’ of the soul. Nevertheless, it can legitimately be said that the presence of those qualities – perception, knowledge, bliss, and energy – are sufficient to define the soul as a totally distinct and unique entity, an existence separates from all others” (Jaini 106). Not only does the *jīva* have all those infinite properties, but it also has always existed from a beginningless past, and it will continue to exist forever. The reason why you and I do not currently have all of these infinite properties is because of karma. In Jainism, *jīva* and karma are real substances. Actual physical karma particles bind to each *jīva*, and distort and obscure their properties. Through self-effort, austerities, and following Jain doctrines, a human can burn off the karma from the *jīva* and realize its infinite potential.

Once an individual burns off the karma and perfects himself, i.e., the *jīva*, he does not instantly die or disappear or anything like that. He becomes an *arhat*. An *arhat* is a human who has attained infinite perception, knowledge, bliss, and energy, but still has a body. Certain *arhats* are known as *tīrthamkaras* because of the extent to which they propagate the Jain religion with their divine speech (*divyadhvani*), and it is the *tīrthamkaras* that have emerged as the most salient object of Jain worship. At death, the *arhat* reaches *mokṣa*: the body is lost, no new body is taken, and the four divine *guṇas* are maintained. After death, the bodiless *arhat* is now known as a *siddha*. *Siddhas* (in their pure form of soul) reside, in complete perfection, at the top of the universe in a place called the *siddha-loka*. It is important to note that in Jainism, souls retain their individuality both before and after liberation. They all share in the same divinity, and there are an infinite number of individual souls sharing in the same divinity, but there is no merging into oneness as in monistic philosophies.² These perfected and liberated souls can be collectively called God.

Besides the *arhats* and *siddhas*, various other types of individuals are well on their way to spiritual perfection. These would be the *ācāryas* (head monk), the *upādhyāyas* (teacher monk), and all the *sādhus* (monks) in the world. The *arhats* and *siddhas* are also called *jinās*. *Jina* means ‘conqueror’, specifically, conqueror of the senses and passions. Just to clarify, *jinās* are the conquerors, and Jains are the followers of the *jinās*. This may not perfectly fit the traditional Western concept of God, but such a concept is not well defined, and I argue that Jains do believe in God and that Jainism is, in fact, theistic both in practice and theory.

Worship and Ritual: Jainism is Theistic in Practice

A great example of how the concept of the *jina* plays into the everyday life of the Jain is in the phrase ‘Jai Jinendra’. ‘Jai Jinendra’ is a ubiquitous Jain salutation that is sure to be heard at any Jain gathering. It means, ‘Hail to the Conqueror of the Senses’. When it is said to someone, it pays respects to all the *jinās* of the past, present, and future. It is a strikingly powerful and meaningful salutation compared with its functional analogous, such as “Hello, how are you doing?” Unlike ‘Jai Jinendra’, other greetings tend to engage the surface and temporal aspects of the self.

² viviktamavyayaṃ siddhaṃ sva-svabhāvopabdhaye |
Sva-svabhāvamayaṃ buddhaṃ dhruvaṃ staumi vikalmaṣam || (*Yogasāra-Prābhṛta* 1.1)

The *arhats*, *siddhas*, *ācāryas*, *upādhyāyas*, and the *sādhus* are considered the *pañca-parameṣṭhin*, or the Five Divinities, or Five Worshipful Ones. The *arhats* and *siddhas* are God, and the others are well on their way. Paying homage to these Five Divinities makes up the core of the *Namaskāra Mantra*, which is by far the most commonly practiced form of worship in Jainism. “This mantra is the first thing that a Jaina learns, always remembers, uses as an incantation, tells on the rosary, and recites on leaving the bed, entering the temple, starting worship, going to bed, and when beginning any auspicious undertaking” (J. P. Jain 128). Along with the *Namaskāra Mantra*, there is also a very intricate *pūjā* that many Jains often partake in. Rice, cloves, water, oil, and various other items have very significant meanings. Jain temple life is very active. There are often pilgrims staying at the rest houses (*dharmasālās*) on the temple grounds. It is common to see Jains prostrate before an icon of a *tīrthamkara*.

Jain Atheism

I initially set out to explore Jain atheism. I quickly discovered that I was mainly exploring Jain theism, but my initial misdirection has helped clarify the current thesis. Finding a definition of atheism, and, related to that, finding a definition of God was more difficult than it should have been. The *Encyclopedia of Religion* defines atheism as,

The doctrine that God does not exist, that belief in the existence of God is a false belief. The word *God* here refers to a divine being regarded as the independent creator of the world, a being superlatively powerful, wise, and good (James 576).

The God of Jainism is superlatively powerful, wise, and good. He has also existed forever. Not only has every soul always existed, but the whole world has always existed. Because the world is uncreated, the God in Jainism cannot be a creator God, but it is for this reason that this definition of atheism and of God renders Jainism atheistic.

Of the many different types of atheism, there are two relevant categories for this discussion: practical atheism and theoretical atheism. A theoretical atheist self-consciously and thoughtfully denies the existence of God. A practical atheist believes God exists, but lives as though God does not exist (Thiselton 4). It should be added that to live as though God exists does not just imply the nebulous attribute of “being a good person.” Surely there are many theoretical atheists who are good people. To live as though God exists would essentially entail some form of worship, a code of ethics that reflects the belief in God, and a life that is oriented towards God.

If Jainism is atheistic, what type of atheism is it? As in theoretical atheism, Jainism self-consciously denies the existence of a creator God. If Jains are theoretical atheists, then they must comprise a new type of theoretical atheist who self-consciously deny the existence of God but live as though they believe in God. Following the above formulation, this means that while denying the existence of a creator God, Jains not only tend to be good people, but that they also have some form of worship, a code of ethics that reflects the belief in God, and a life that is oriented towards God.

Jains easily meet the criteria for this new type of “Theistic Theoretical Atheism.” The main tenet of Jainism is *ahiṃsā* or non-violence, and most Jains choose careers and lifestyles that cause minimal, or at least reduced, *hiṃsā*. Having a relatively small following, about 4.45 million, certain generalizations can be made (P. C. Jain 62). Most Jains are vegetarians. Most Jains are hard-working and contribute much to society. Most Jains engage in fervent rituals, with icons, prayers, *bhakti*, and *pūja* that can be seen at most temples. The point is that Jains distinctively live as if God exists. They qualify as ‘good people’ who have a code of ethics that reflects their belief in God, and they have lives that are oriented towards their concept of God.

But, apparently, as is the theory, Jainism does not believe in God, so what is this ‘thing’ that makes Jains live as though God does exist? The answer, in fact, is God. The Jains do believe in a God after their own way of thinking. Jainism is not atheistic, but theistic, and it is the dissonance between the Jain concept of God and the traditional concept of God that has caused Jainism to be understood as atheistic.

Why Jainism is Considered Atheistic

The terms *āstika* and *nāstika* are sometimes confused with theism and atheism. The different interpretations of *āstika* and *nāstika* are outside the scope of this paper, but an extremely brief summary could be as follows: To Pāṇini, *nāstika* is not accepting life after death. According to *Nyāyakośa*, a *nāstika* does not accept the existence of *īśvara*. And Manu says that a *nāstika* rejects the authority of the *Vedas* (Tukol 61; Kothari 131). For this paper, *nāstika* can mean the rejection of the *Vedas* and the Vedic gods. In that manner, Jainism surely is a *nāstika* tradition, but that does not imply atheism.

The confusion of the terms *āstika* and *nāstika* pales in comparison to the confusion and relativity of the terms – theism and atheism, which is made apparent by the commonly cited examples of Socrates being accused of atheism for not believing in the official Athenian gods and of early Christians being considered atheists by the Romans because of a lack of idol worship. (Shah 15-16)

It is likely that Jainism is considered atheistic because of a problem with terminology, but redefining such terms is outside the scope of this paper. Jainism is considered atheistic primarily because there is no belief in a creator God. Most current definitions of God place much emphasis on creativity. The Jains believe that the universe has always existed, and thus there is no possibility of a creator god. Another reason that contributes to Jainism’s atheistic reputation is a lack of belief in *īśvara*, or a personal god. Given the ritualism so prevalent in Jainism, it might be surprising to know that the God of Jainism cannot intervene, and is completely unresponsive and indifferent to worship, prayer, and human affairs. The non-interventionist attribute of the Jain concept of God is another reason why Jains may be considered atheists.

Devotion to a Non-intervening God

It is of the utmost importance to understand that in Jainism, God is not worshiped in hopes to attain boons or have wishes granted, or even to have assistance on the path towards liberation. Jains are well aware of the non-interventionism of their God. In God, Jains see the qualities they want to foster within themselves. The *arhats*, *siddhas*, *ācāryas*, *upādhyāyas*, and *sādhus* are role models and sources of inspiration and guidance. Devotion towards the *Jinas* (a common term for all and *siddhas*) turns the mind away from the wants of the body and turns the mind towards divine *guṇas* (attributes) of God. The following quotes from a canonical text do well to illustrate this point:

“...the meditating yogi, who identifies himself with the omniscient, finds himself to be an omniscient....The omniscient on whom I am meditating is myself....By meditating about the detached, one himself becomes detached and gets free from the karmic bondage....He, who constantly indulges in a certain sentiment, comes to be identified with that particular sentiment, just as a crystal that assumes the color in the juxtaposition of which it is placed.” (The *Yogaśāstra* 9.11-14).

This is a very sophisticated concept, but almost all Jains seem to understand it. When Jains are reciting a *mantra* to a *mūrti* (image) of Mahāvīra, they are not worshipping the *mūrti*, and they are not worshipping Mahāvīra, but they are worshipping the *guṇas* of Mahāvīra’s, in hopes to attain the same *guṇas* in themselves. Jains do not call themselves idol-worshippers, “but profess to be ideal-worshippers” (J. P. Jain 126).

This concept of ‘worship of the *guṇas*’ can be known as *guṇānuvāda*. ‘*Guṇa*’ meaning quality, and ‘*anuvāda*’ meaning repetition/translation. In the context of this term, *anuvāda* means the repetition/translation of a specific quality or set of qualities. *Guṇānuvāda* can be understood as being the worship of qualities in hopes of fostering them in the self. Most Jains are not familiar with this term, and no one could give me an exact reference to where I could find the actual term *guṇānuvāda* in the literature, but it perfectly describes the mechanism in Jain worship.³ While I could not find the term *guṇānuvāda*, the literature does contain countless examples of the concept:

By God, Jainism understands a liberated soul...in this sense, God is an example to inspire and to guide. (Sharma 4: fn 1)

To realize my own (pure) nature I eulogize the perfect one... (Yogasāra-Prābhṛta 1.1)

Jina-worship promises no reward whatsoever save the turning of one’s mind toward the goal of *mokṣa*. (Jaini 194)

³ This description is based on the discussions with Natalia Zheleznova (Moscow State University), and Dr. S. P. Pandey and Dr. S. R. Bhatt (International School for Jain Studies 2007 faculty)

I bow to the Lord who is the leader of the path of liberation, the destroyer of the mountains of *karmas* and the knower of the whole reality, so that I may realize those qualities.⁴

Definitions of God in Jainism

Attempting to define God in Jainism proves challenging, given its multifaceted nature. The perspectives of scholars, lay Jains, and canonical texts are considered to form a comprehensive understanding of the divine within Jainism. Giving a succinct definition of God in Jainism is no easy task. Here are a variety of attempts from an array of sources:

God is, in short, the coalescence of this spiritual principle emancipated from the bondages of matter in all its purity, perfection, freedom, and blessedness. (An Encyclopedia of Jainism 264)

The Jaina idea of God is that of a pure soul possessed of infinite faith, knowledge, bliss, and power. (Tukol 64)

Pure Soul is the supreme divine being. They are in reality one and the same, and the final goal of any particular soul is the attainment of infinite knowledge (*ananta-jñāna*), infinite faith (*ananta-darśana*), infinite bliss (*ananta-sukha*), and infinite power (*ananta-vīrya*). (Kothari 14)

Taking all of these into consideration, the Jain God can be defined as the perfected souls.

God vs. Godhood

Distinguishing between the existence of God and Godhood in Jainism offers a more nuanced perspective. While Jains may not adhere to a traditional creator God, the concept of Godhood, embodied by liberated souls, remains central. The concept of *siddha-loka* in Jainism and that the infinite number of perfected souls actually exist maintains that Jainism is not atheistic. In Jainism, there are an infinite number of beings that have attained Godhood, and thus they are God. Jainism, then, believes in both God and Godhood.

Attributes of the God in Jainism

Divine attributes are properties that are often claimed to be essential and/or unique to God. Very common divine attributes are the omni-properties: omniscience, omnipotence, and omni-benevolence. It is often said that God should be a being who created the world and rules over it. Various religions proclaim different divine attributes. There is no ultimate list that compiles all of the possible divine attributes, and there is no minimal number of divine attributes, or one necessary attribute, that a religion's deity must have for that deity to be considered God, or for that religion to be considered atheistic or theistic.

⁴ mokṣamārgasya netāraṃ bhettāraṃ karmabhūbhṛtām |
jñātāraṃ viśvatattvānām vande tadguṇalabdhave || (*Sarvārthasiddhi* 1.1)

I asked many Jains if they believe in God, and the answer is usually “no”. But when I pressed them on the issue, asking “Well then what is being worshiped in the temple?” The reply is usually along the lines of, “Well, Jains don’t believe in a creator God.” My response is that the creative attribute is not a necessary attribute of God.

Let us discuss some divine attributes of God in Jainism that can be the parameters of a God:

- **Omniscience, omnipotence, and omni-benevolence:** It has been stated numerous times in this essay that the perfected soul has infinite knowledge and perception, so the point of the Jain God having omniscience does not require additional attention. It has also been stated that the soul has infinite power, but also that it does not intervene in the world. The important connection here is that the perfected soul has infinite bliss, thus it has no need for any action. A soul could act, it has the power to act, but it has no need or desire to act (Tukol 65). Any action would represent a need or a want, and a liberated soul has no needs or wants. Furthermore, any soul that did have a desire to act would necessarily not be a perfected soul, thus it would not have infinite power.

Omni-benevolence is also a tricky one. The argument against the Jain God being omnibenevolent is strong because even though the Jain God is all-powerful, he does not intervene to prevent suffering and evil, but theodicy is an issue for all religions that espouse an all-powerful and all-good God. But of all such religions, theodicy is the least contentious in Jainism because of the position that infinite bliss rules out any motive for action even though the power for action is there.

- **Personal:** Jains deny the existence of *īśvara*, a personal God, but they often worship God through an individual person, such as Mahāvīra. In this way the attribute of a personal God enters into Jain worship. Hemacandra says: “Omniscient, with desires and other faults conquered, honored by the triple world, and explaining the true meaning: He is God, Arhat, the Supreme Lord” (Cort 93). Here, ‘Supreme Lord’ was translated from ‘*parameśvara*’, which is the combination of the words *parama* and *īśvara*.
- **Eternal:** Each soul has been bound by karma since beginningless time, and once liberated, each soul will remain liberated forever in the *siddha-loka*.
- **Transcendent:** The liberated souls are literally above us, at the top of the Universe in the *siddha-loka*, where they cannot intervene in the world.
- **Eminent:** The potential for God is inside each human.⁵
- **Oneness:** Each soul does maintain its individuality, but it could be said that the God in Jainism possesses of an infinite number of attributes and each individual soul has the potential to attain these infinite divine qualities.

⁵ Some Jains believe that some souls are, meaning they are incapable of attaining *mokṣa* (Jaini 140).

Application of Guṇānuvāda

The practice of *guṇānuvāda*, or the worship of divine attributes within Jainism, is compared to similar concepts in secular and religious contexts. This practice, when centered on divine attributes, can be termed *guṇānutheism*, emphasizing its unique role in Jain worship. The concept of *guṇānuvāda* was mentioned before as a central mechanism in Jain worship. But *guṇānuvāda* is not specific to Jainism. The worship of qualities with the intent to foster them in the self is common in many secular activities. When I was younger, I wanted to be really good at basketball. Not only would I practice all day, but every night as I fell asleep, and every morning when I woke up, I would gaze at large wall posters of my favorite basketball players in hopes of fostering in myself their qualities. They would inspire me, and increase my resolution to practice more. That is a type of secular *guṇānuvāda*.

In Christianity, even though most worship is towards a God who has the ability to intervene, there is still an aspect of *guṇānuvāda*. The ever so popular plastic bracelets that say, “WWJD,” “What Would Jesus Do?” are actually a form of *guṇānuvāda*. The bracelets remind the wearer to be like Jesus in everyday actions, thus fostering the qualities of Jesus in themselves.

Guṇānuvāda in Jainism

Guṇānuvāda in Jainism is distinct from *guṇānuvāda* in the secular, atheistic, and religious applications examples above. In Jainism, the qualities that are being worshiped with the intent to foster them in the self are actually divine attributes. In the example of the basketball *guṇānuvāda*, the qualities being worshiped might be physical prowess or accurate throwing of the ball. In the Humanist *guṇānuvāda*, the qualities might be full appreciation for all human beings, an appropriate attitude towards life, and faith in reason. Even though Jesus is considered God in Christianity, the WWJD *guṇānuvāda* does not focus on Jesus’ divine attributes, but on his human attributes. The wearer of the WWJD bracelet is not trying to foster the omni-properties, but just increased morality. In Jain *guṇānuvāda*, the qualities are infinite knowledge, perception, bliss, and power. When the qualities being worshiped in *guṇānuvāda* are divine attributes, I would like to call this *guṇānutheism*, and while it may be unsatisfactory, it fits better than atheism as a possible classification of Jain divinity.

Other Possible Classifications

Both Humanism and Jainism place much value on the potential of humans. A main difference is that Jainism gives humans the potential to be God. In the Article “Hindu Titanism,” Nicholas Gier quotes Heinrich Zimmer, calling this the “heresy of Titanism,” and it is characterized by the “preemption of divine prerogatives and confusion of human and divine attributes” (Gier 73). Gier discusses but does not define the term *spiritual Titanism*. He defines Titanism as “a radical humanism that does not recognize that there are limits to what humans can become and what they should do” (Gier 73). Any religion that takes part in the Titanism discussed by Gier and Zimmer, that is, the attainment of divine attributes by humans, can be considered a type of spiritual Titanism. The spiritual progress of the *arhat* and *siddha* from human to God is an

exemplary form of spiritual Titanism. But spiritual Titanism is not an exclusive categorization, it is just descriptive. Jainism can be spiritually titanic and theistic, atheistic, or anything in between.

L.R. Joshi, in “A New Interpretation of Indian Atheism,” describes a number of Indian religions, including Jainism, as being semi-theistic. He defines semi-theism as a seemingly atheistic doctrine “which shows clear tendencies towards theism” (L. Joshi 205). Semi-theism is a very useful term, and while it may, as Joshi argues, perfectly describe what Buddhism has become, the classification does not work as well in Jainism. The term semi-theism implies some sort of partial or incomplete theism. This stems from Joshi’s definition of theism: “Theism stands for the doctrine of a personal God (*īśvara*), who is the ultimate principle of the universe, the primordial guardian of moral values, and lastly, the highest object of our religious worship” (Joshi 190). Joshi uses semi-theism for a religion that has some but not all of the listed aspects. Joshi is implying that there are some essential attributes necessary for a religion to be considered theistic. I had argued earlier that this is not the case. But within the generally accepted definition of theism and of God, Jainism does fit well within the realm of Joshi’s semi-theism.

Another possible classification is as *uttaravāda* (K. Jain). In Hinduism, *avatāras* are Gods or gods that descend to the level of humans. This is known as *avataravāda*. In Jainism, the humans rise to the level of God, and can be known as *uttaravāda*. Here it means ‘ascend’. Deism is the belief that God exists but does not intervene in the world beyond what is necessary to create it. The obvious issue here is that the God of Jainism is not a creator God. But both deism and Jain theism believe in a non-interventionist God. Non-theists do not affirm or negate the existence of God. They are likely to understand God as a symbol of human values and aspirations. Similarly, the Jain God is a symbol of human values and aspirations, but the important difference is that in Jainism God actually exists in the *siddha-loka*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while various classifications offer insights into Jain theism, *guṇānūtheism* emerges as a fitting descriptor. This nuanced form of worship, centered on divine attributes, captures the essence of how Jains navigate their spiritual journey. All of these different classifications of religions bring something to the table of Jain theism, but it is *guṇānūtheism*, the worship of divine attributes to foster them in the self, that most accurately describes Jainism. The paper looked into the concepts of theism as well as atheism and draws upon the practices of spirituality in Jainism that centers on praising the Jain God for their attributes.

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