

CONTINUITY OF INDIAN ETHICAL VALUES IN JAINISM AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF SANT KABIR

Navin Kr. Srivastav¹

Abstract

This paper examines the ethical continuity between Jainism and the philosophy of Kabir within Indian philosophical traditions. Although rooted in different historical and social contexts, both emphasise values such as non-violence, truthfulness, compassion, self-restraint, non-possessiveness, equality, inner purity, and tolerance. Jainism presents these principles through an ethical and spiritual background preserved through the teachings of the *tīrthankaras*, while Kabir expresses similar concerns through *sākhīs*, *bījaks*, and *padas*, emphasising inner transformation and social equality while challenging ritualism, discrimination, and religious divisions. The paper argues that these shared values demonstrate a continuing ethical heritage in which fundamental principles are transmitted across generations while adapting to changing social contexts. Their teachings remain relevant to contemporary challenges such as violence, intolerance, materialism, and social inequality, highlighting the enduring importance of ethical and value-based living.

Introduction

India has a long and rich history of values that guide how people live, interact, and support one another. One of the most important of these is *dharma*, a concept that encompasses the principles and duties that guide our actions and choices. It encourages individuals to do what is right according to their role, responsibilities, and circumstances. In Indic value system, *ahimsā*, or non-violence, has an important place. This principle teaches kindness and avoiding harm to others. Other key values include *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *aparigraha* (non-possession), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *tyāga* (letting go of selfishness). Not limited to any one tradition, these values are part of daily life. For example, they influence how people live, understand each other, and co-operate.

Traditions such as Jainism and the poetry of Sant Kabir (16th century CE) demonstrate how these values can be expressed and lived in diverse ways, inspiring thoughtful, compassionate, and balanced lives. Both Jainism and the teachings of Sant Kabir emphasize the purity of the soul, non-violence, and social equality. While Jain philosophy is characterized by renunciation, self-discipline, and spiritual practice, Kabir's poetry² centres on personal experience, devotion,

¹ Associate Director, International School for Jain Studies, Pune; Email: nsrivastav@isjs.in

² In Kabir's poetry, *sākhīs* are short, often two-line verses that convey his teachings, observations, and philosophical insights. *Dohās* are similarly concise couplets, often expressing moral, spiritual, or philosophical ideas. *Bījaka* refers to an important collection of Kabir's compositions, traditionally comprising *sākhīs* (couplets conveying teachings), *śabdās* (lyrical songs or devotional verses), and *ramainīs* (longer narrative or didactic compositions). *Padas* are lyrical and devotional verses, often intended to be sung. Thus, while *sākhī* and *dohā* denote short poetic forms, *Bījaka* refers to a collection of compositions, while *śabdās*, *ramainīs*, and *padas* describe different forms of lyrical, narrative, or didactic expression within the Kabir tradition.

and direct spiritual realization. Despite these differences, both traditions contribute significantly to the depth and diversity of Indian philosophical and spiritual thought. Exploring the similarities between Jainism and Kabir can, therefore, illuminate the shared ethical and spiritual foundations of Indian traditions. This paper seeks to examine these connections through selected examples.

The Four Kaṣāyas (Passions)

In Jainism, the *kaṣāyas* are the passions or emotional defilements that bind the soul to the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*). These passions, namely *krodha* (anger), *māna* (ego), *māyā* (deceit), *lobha* (greed), are considered the primary cause of karmic bondage, obstructing spiritual progress and liberation. Each *kaṣāya* is a mental disposition that causes karmic influx and sticks karmic particles to the soul.

The *Daśavaikālika Sūtra* states:

He who desires to benefit his soul should avoid the four great faults that are the sources of all sins: anger, ego, deceit, and greed.³

Anger destroys love and goodwill, ego destroys humbleness, deceit destroys friendship, and greed destroys all virtues.⁴

One should subdue anger with tranquillity, conceit with humbleness, deceit with simplicity, and greed with contentment.⁵

Similarly, Kabir writes:

Even after renouncing worldly pleasures, the ascetic did not attain true distinction – because he/she did not let go of his/her ego. This very ego has led great sages and ascetics astray, and it continues to corrupt everyone even today.⁶

Truth

The Jain philosophy emphasizes five core virtues that are essential for human beings who aspire to lead an ethically grounded life. The *Tattvārthasūtra* of Umāsvāti/Umāsvāmī (2nd century CE), outlines these principles, highlighting their significance in the pursuit of spiritual development and liberation. It says: Abstinence from violence, falsehood, stealing, carnality and possessiveness – these are the vows.⁷

³ *kohaṃ māṇaṃ ca māyaṃ ca lobhaṃ ca pāvavaḍḍhaṇaṃ | vame cattāri dose u icchantā hiyamappaṇo ||* (Daśavaikālika Sūtra 8.37)

⁴ *koho pūiṃ paṇāsei māṇo viṇayanāsaṇo | māyā mittāṇi nāsei loho savvaviṇāsaṇo ||* (Ibid 8.38)

⁵ *uvasameṇa haṇe kohaṃ māṇaṃ maddavayā jiṇe | māyaṃ ca ajjavabhāveṇa lobhaṃ santosaṃ jiṇe ||* (Ibid 8.39)

⁶ *māyā taje kyā bhayā, jo māna tajā nahim jāya | jehi māne munivara ṭhage, so māna sabana ko khāya ||* (Bījaka: Pārakha Prabodhinī Vyākhyā 6.140)

⁷ *hiṃsā'nṛtasteyā'brahmaparigrahebhya viratirvratam |* (Tattvārthasūtra 7.1)

The *sūtras* that follow describe injury etc. as severance of vitalities out of passion and so on. Abstaining from these is called the vow which is a deliberately declared and self-imposed observance. Similarly, the importance of truth is reflected in Kabir's philosophy. In *Kabīra Granthāvalī*, he writes: "There is no austerity greater than truth, and no sin greater than false conduct (untruth). In the heart of one who embodies truth, God Himself resides."⁸

Mutual Dependence

In Jainism, the *Tattvārthasūtra* says: "All life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence."⁹

Similarly, in Kabir's *Bījaka*, the same essence is explained as: "Life cannot exist without other life; one's existence is borrowed from another. Show compassion and protect all living beings – this is the true wisdom of the learned."¹⁰

Both Jainism and Kabir's philosophy, therefore, emphasize the deep interconnectedness of all forms of life. While Jainism expresses this through the principle of mutual dependence and non-violence, Kabir highlights it through compassion, shared existence, and respect for every living being. Together, they remind us that life is not lived in isolation. Our existence is sustained by countless others, and therefore, caring for and protecting all forms of life is both an ethical responsibility and a mark of true wisdom.

The Role of the Guru

When we discuss the role of guru, a similar concept occurs in both Jainism and Kabir's poetry. The role of the guru in both is profound, though expressed through distinct spiritual frameworks. Jainism does not use the term "guru" in the same informal or mystical sense as Kabir or Bhakti traditions. Instead, it recognizes a structured lineage of spiritual authorities, each with defined roles. These are known as the *pañca-parameṣṭhins* (five supreme lords) and honored in the most important Jain mantra, the *pañca-namaskāra*:

I bow to the *arhats*,
I bow to the *siddhas*,
I bow to the *ācāryas*,
I bow to the *upādhyāyas*,
I bow to all of the *sādhus* of the world.¹¹

Arhat: Ford-maker, who reveals the path to liberation; not a personal guru but a cosmic guide.

⁸ *sāmca barābara tapa nahīm, jhūṭha barābara pāpa |
jāke hiradai sāmca hai, tākai hiradai āpa ||* (Sākhī 15.16)

⁹ *parasparopagraho jīvānām |* (Tattvārthasūtra 5.21)

¹⁰ *jīva binā jīva bāmce nahīm, jīva kā jīva adhāra |
jīva dayā kari pāliye, paṇḍita karo vicāra ||* (Bījaka: Pārakha Prabodhinī Vyākhyā 6.182)

¹¹ *namo arihantāṇaṃ | namo siddhāṇaṃ | namo āyariyāṇaṃ | namo uvajjhāyāṇaṃ | namo loe savva sāhūṇaṃ ||* (Kalpasūtra 1)

Ācārya: Head of monastic order, who leads the *saṃgha*, interprets scriptures, and enforces discipline.

Upādhyāya: Scripture teacher, who instructs male and female ascetics.

Sādhu: All ascetics.

The honor paid to gurus in the most auspicious Jain mantra reflects Jain reverence for the role of guru. Similarly, the *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra*, offers insights into the role of the guru. It emphasizes that the guru must embody qualities worthy of reverence – serving as a living example of discipline, wisdom, and spiritual integrity. It states: “Whether kind or strict, a guru’s discipline helps correct mistakes. A wise student sees it as helpful, but a foolish one feels offended.”¹² The same is also emphasised in Muni Rāmasiṃha’s eleventh-century *Pāhuḍadohā*: “People keep wandering from one false path to another until the guru’s grace enables them to recognize the divine within their own being. That is, after meeting the guru, one gets the knowledge of truth and falsehood, illusion and reality.”¹³

Similarly, in Kabir’s philosophy, the guru is central to spiritual awakening, even more important than God in practical terms. For him, true spirituality comes from personal experience and inner change, not from rituals or religious rules. The guru guides the seeker on this path, helping them realize the divine within. He beautifully explains his idea as: “When both guru and God stand before me, whose feet should I touch first? I bow to the guru, for it is he who showed me God.”¹⁴ He also says: “I would dedicate every moment of my life to the guru a hundred times over. It is through the guru’s grace that I was instantly transformed from a mere human into a divine being.”¹⁵

Again, Kabir says:

The guru is like a potter, and the disciple is like a clay pot. The guru gently supports from within while striking firmly from the outside to remove flaws. Through this careful shaping, the disciple is perfected.¹⁶

The Importance of True Knowledge

In Jainism, it is emphasized that true knowledge lies in the realization of one's own soul. This insight is conveyed in the *Yogasāra* by Yogīndudeva (6th century CE), where he says: “Even those who study the scriptures are ignorant (fools) if they do not know their own soul.

¹² *aṇusāsaṇamovāyaṃ, dukkaḍassa ya coyaṇaṃ |
hiyaṃ taṃ mannae paṇṇo, vesam hoe asāhuṇo* || (Uttarādhyayana Sūtra 1.28)

¹³ *tāma kutitthaiṃ paribhamaiṃ dhuttima tāma karanti |
guruḥ pasāem jāma ṇavi dehaham deu muṇanti* || (Pāhuḍadohā 81)

¹⁴ *guru govinda doṭ khaḍe, kāke lāguṃ pāya |
balihārī guru āpano, govinda diyo batāya* || (Gurudeva kā Aṅga 10)

¹⁵ *balihārī guru āpane, ghaḍī ghaḍī sau sau bāra |
mānuṣa se devata kiyā, karata na lāgī bāra* || (Ibid 11)

¹⁶ *guru kumbhāra, śiṣa kumbha hai, gaḍhi-gaḍhi kāḍhai khoṭa |
antara hātha sahāra dai, bāhara bāhai coṭa* || (Kabīra Dohāvalī 8.143)

Therefore, clearly and certainly, such a person cannot attain liberation (*nirvāṇa*).¹⁷ Similarly, Muni Rāmasiṃha states: “That is, one may read extensively until the palate dries, yet remain ignorant; instead, read that one syllable through which one attains the abode of liberation.”¹⁸

Same insight is found in the *Kabīra Granthāvalī* as: “People read many books but gained no true wisdom. Only the one who feels divine love is truly wise.”¹⁹

The Superiority of Internal Purity to External Forms

In the Jain tradition, Muni Rāmasiṃha strongly condemns external appearances unaccompanied by inner reality and superficial renunciation. He sharply criticizes those ascetics who may have shaved their heads but are not free from inner impurities. According to his perspective, it is the purification of the mind that serves as the most effective means of transcending worldly existence.²⁰

Kabir also expresses this concept in the *Kabīra Granthāvalī* and says: “Without purity of mind, even if one shaves the head and adopts the garb of a renunciate or ascetic, it is all futile and meaningless.”²¹

Both the traditions within Indic culture emphasize true renunciation as an inner transformation rather than a matter of external appearance. Both reject superficial ascetic practices if the mind remains impure and attached to worldly desires. Their teachings converge on the importance of inner purification as the essential means of overcoming worldly bondage. Thus, despite belonging to different traditions, both place greater value on the transformation of the mind than on external religious observances.

Union of the Soul with the Supreme Principle

In the Jain tradition, Yogīndudeva, in his *Yogasāra*, explains the state of union between the soul (*jīva*) and the supreme principle (*paramātman*). He affirms that in the state of oneness, the soul realizes that the supreme principle is attained within itself.

¹⁷ *sattha paḍhamāta te vi jaḍa appā je na muṇamti |*
tiha kāraṇa e jīva phūḍa na hu nīvvāṇa lahamti || (Yogasāra 53)

¹⁸ *bahuyaem paḍhiyai mūḍha para tālū sukkai jeṇa |*
ekku ji akkharu tam paḍhahu sivapuri gammai jeṇā || (Pāhuḍadohā 98)

¹⁹ *pothī paḍhi-paḍhi jaga muvā, paṇḍita bhayā na koi |*
ekai akṣara prema kā, paḍhe supaṇḍita hoi || (Sākhī 33.3)

²⁰ *muṇḍiyamuṇḍiya muṇḍiyā | siru muṇḍiu cittu na muṇḍiyā ||*
cittaham muṇḍaṇu nim kiyaū | saṃsāraham khaṇḍaṇu te kiyaū || (Pāhuḍadohā 136)

²¹ *kesom kahā bigaḍiyā, je mūṇḍai sau bāra |*
mana kauṃ kāhe na mūṇḍie, jāmaim viṣai vikāra || (Sākhī 25.4)

The supreme principle, which is of the nature of pure knowledge, is none other than the true self – and the true self is none other than that supreme principle. No dualistic distinctions should be made in this realization.²²

Kabir, in his *Kabīra Granthāvalī*, following in the contemplative footsteps of Yogīndudeva, has expressed the same realization of the “I” as “You” – the identity of self and the supreme – in his own words:

By constantly uttering ‘You, You,’ I have become You: nothing of ‘I’ remains in me. The distinction between You and me has disappeared: wherever I look, I see only You.²³

Perspectives on Inherited Status

In Jain tradition, caste is not a divine or immutable category – it’s a consequence of karma, not a birthright. The tradition prohibits caste-based discrimination. The philosophy teaches that all souls are equal in their potential for liberation. In *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra*, Mahāvīra states that by activities, one becomes Brahmin, Vaiśya, Kṣatriya, and Śudra.²⁴

We find a similar sentiment in Kabir’s philosophy. He says, if wisdom does not grow, then what is the benefit of being born into a noble lineage? It is like flowers blooming in a deserted forest – beautiful, yet falling in vain:

Likewise, if one is born into an exalted human birth but departs without engaging in self-purification or contributing to the welfare of others, then such a birth in the cycle of existence is rendered futile.²⁵

The Divinity within the Soul

In Jainism, the concept of God is there but not as a creator. No supreme being governs or initiates the cosmos. Instead, divinity is understood as an inherent potential within every living soul. Each soul possesses four infinities known as *ananta catuṣṭaya* – infinite perception (*darśana*), knowledge (*jñāna*), energy (*vīrya*), and bliss (*ānanda*) – qualities that manifest fully when the soul is liberated from karmic bondage.

Thus, the divine is not something external to be sought in temples, rituals, or distant realms. It is not found through worship of a separate entity, but through disciplined introspection, ethical living, and spiritual purification. This concept is beautifully articulated by Jain *ācāryas*.

²² *jo paramappā so ji hauṁ, jo hauṁ so paramappu |*
iu jāṇevīṇa joiyā, aṭṭhā ma karahu viyappu || (Yogasāra 22)

²³ *tūṁ tūṁ karatā tūṁ bhayā, mujha meṁ rahī na hūṁ |*
bārī pherī bali gāī, jita dekhoṁ tita tūṁ || (Sākhī 3.6)

²⁴ *kammuṇā bambhaṇo hoi, kammuṇā hoi khattio |*
vaisse kammuṇā hoi, suddo havai kamuṇṇā || (Amarmuni, Sacitra Uttarādhyayana Sūtra 25.33)

²⁵ *kāre baṛe kula ṭipajai, jore baṛī budhi nāhiṁ |*
jaisā phūla ujārikā, mithyā lagi jhari jāhiṁ || (Bijaka: Pārakha Prabodhinī Vyākhyā p. 899)

For example, Yogīndudeva says in *Paramātmā Prakāśa*:

The divine self does not reside in temples, nor in stone idols, nor in sacred coatings, nor in painted images. It is indestructible, pure, and composed of knowledge. Such a true inner divinity is found only in equanimity – meaning, it dwells within those souls who have attained a state of balanced awareness. It does not reside elsewhere.²⁶

Similarly, in *Pāhuḍadohā*, Muni Rāmasimha stated: “People seek and worship the divine in temples built by human hands, but they fail to search for the Śiva-consciousness that resides within the temple of their own body.”²⁷

This above insight resonates deeply with Kabir’s philosophy. Kabir consistently rejected the idea of seeking the divine in external forms, rituals, or constructed spaces. Instead, he urged seekers to turn inward, recognizing the sacred presence within the human body itself.

One of his most famous couplets captures this beautifully:

O seeker! Why do you wander in search of me? I am right beside you. You will not find me in temples, nor in mosques, nor in Kābā or Kailash. Not in rituals, nor in yogic practices or renunciation. If your search is sincere, I will be found in just a moment. Kabir says – Listen, O saintly soul, I dwell in every breath you take.²⁸

Perspectives on Food

Food is a significant topic in both Jain tradition and Kabir’s philosophy. In Jain tradition, food is more than just something to eat – it’s a way to live with care and kindness. Jains follow a strict vegetarian diet and avoid meat, fish, eggs, root vegetables like potatoes, onions and garlic, and honey. In his commentary on *Sūtrakṛtāṅga Sūtra*, Śīlāṅka states: “One should not be attached to delicious food and drink.”²⁹ In *Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya*, Amṛtacandra states: Those who desire avoiding *himsā* (violence), should, first of all, renounce consumption of liquor, flesh, honey, and the five *udumbara* fruits (fig family fruits).³⁰

This is to prevent harm to any living beings, even tiny ones we can’t see. Jainism suggests to drink filtered water and eat before sunset to avoid hurting small creatures that come out at night. This careful way of eating shows deep respect for all life and helps followers stay pure, practice self-control (*saṁyama*), and move toward spiritual freedom.

²⁶ *deu ṇa deule ṇavi silae ṇavi lippai ṇavi citti |*
akḥau ṇiraṇjaṇu ṇāṇamau siu saṇṭhiu sama-citti || (Paramātmā Prakāśa & Yogasāra 1.123)

²⁷ *mūḍhā jovaiṁ devalaiṁ loyahiṁ jāiṁ kiyaṁ |*
deha ṇa picchai appaṇiya jahaiṁ siu santu ṭhiyāiṁ || (Pāhuḍadohā 181)

²⁸ *mokom kahām ḍhuṇḍhe re bande, main to tere pāsa meṁ |*
nā devala meṁ nā masajida meṁ, nā kābe kailāśa meṁ |
khoji hoyā to turanta mili haum, pala bhara kī talāsa meṁ |
kahaiṁ kabīra suno bhāi sādho, saba sāmsana kī sāmsa meṁ | (Kabīra Dohāvalī 4.17)

²⁹ *annassa paṇassa aṇaṇugiddham |* (Śīlāṅkācārya Ṭīkā on Sūtrakṛtāṅga Sūtra 1.12.17)

³⁰ *madyam māmsam kṣaudram pañcodumbaraphalāni yatnena |*
himsā vyuparatikāmairmoktavyāni prathamameva | (Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya 61)

On the other hand, Kabir does not emphasize food-related rules in the same way as Jainism. Instead, he uses food as a metaphor to convey that what one consumes influences one's thoughts, speech, and overall conduct. He likely followed a simple vegetarian lifestyle common among Bhakti saints, and his teachings emphasize spiritual food – love, wisdom, and detachment – over physical consumption. He clearly states: Just as a person consumes food and water, so is the mind shaped accordingly. The kind of water one drinks is reflected in the nature of one's speech.³¹

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that Jainism and Sant Kabir stand as enduring pillars emerging from the spiritual traditions of India and reflect a shared set of values despite their different origins (Jainism in the Śramaṇa tradition and Kabir in the Nirguṇa Bhakti stream). Jainism teaches these values through strict practices, careful living, and the belief that truth has many sides, while Kabir expresses them through heartfelt poetry, inner reflection, and a rejection of rigid rituals and divisions. Together, they show that the same deep values can be lived in different ways – one through quiet discipline, the other through bold insight. This is the beauty of the Indic traditions. They allow each person to find their own spiritual path while still contributing to a shared ethical world.

We can say that, just as the ocean absorbs all rivers into itself, the Indian value tradition – rooted in principles like non-violence, truth, non-stealing, non-possession, celibacy, compassion, forgiveness, etc. – has the capacity to hold diverse philosophies and faiths within its fold. This spirit of inclusivity is clearly reflected in Jain philosophy and in the teachings of Sant Kabir. It is this very consciousness – one that harmonizes unity within diversity – that forms the source of India's ethical and spiritual heritage.

References

- Amarmuni, ed. *Sachitra Shri Kalpasūtra*. Delhi: Padma Prakashan, 2008.
- . *Sacitra Uttarādhyayana Sūtra*. Ed. Amarmuni. Agra: Diwakar Prakashan, n.d.
- Amṛtacandra. *Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya*. Ed. Nathuram Premi. Agas: Shri Paramshrut Prabhavak Mandal, Shrimad Rajchandra Ashram, 1998.
- Das, Abhilash, ed. *Bījaka: Pārakha Prabodhinī Vyākhyā*. Vol. 2. Allahabad: Kabir Parakh Sansthan, 2016.
- “Gurudeva kā Aṅga.” *Kabīra Sākhī-Saṁgraha*. Allahabad: Belvedere Steam Printing Works, 1912.
- Madhukarmuni, Yuvacharya Shri, ed. *Daśavaikālika Sūtra*. Trans. Surendra Bothara. Beawar: Shri Agam Prakashan Samiti, n.d.

³¹ *jaisā ana jala khāiye, taisā hī mana hoyā |*
jaisā pānī pījiye, taisī vānī soya || (Upadeśa kā Aṅga 112)

- Nilotpāl, ed. *Kabīra Dohāvalī*. New Delhi: Granth Academy, n.d.
 <<https://archive.org/details/kabeerdohawalihindi/mode/2up>>.
- Rāmasimha, Muni. *Pāhuḍadohā*. Ed. Devendrakumar Shastri. New Delhi: Bharatiya Jnanpith, 1998.
- “Sākhī.” *Kabīra Granthāvalī*. Ed. Parasnath Tiwari. Prayag: Prayag Vishwavidyalaya, 1961.
- Sudarshan Lal, ed. *Sūtrakṛtāṅga Sūtra with Śīlāṅkācārya Ṭīkā*. Gulabpura: Shri Shvetambar Sthanakawasi Jain Svadhyayi Sangh, 1999.
- Umāsvāti. *Tattvārthasūtra: That Which Is*. Trans. Nathmal Tatia. New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1994.
- “Upadeśa kā Aṅga.” *Kabīra Sākhī-Saṁgraha*. Allahabad: Belvedere Steam Printing Works, 1912. 110-15.
- Yogīndudeva. *Paramātmā Prakāśa & Yogasāra*. Ed. A.N. Upadhye. Agas: Param Shrut Prabhavak Mandal, Shrimad Rajachandra Ashram, 1973.
- . *Yogasāra*. Ed. Nandaram Goyal. Trans. Bhupendrakumarji Nyayatirth. Agra: Shri Digambar Bhratri Sangh, 1937.
