



ISJS NEWSLETTER

Vol#09 | Issue#2 | No.2 | February 2026

Speak Up

HARIBHADRA'S SILENCE ON REFUTATION OF KARMA AS THE SOLE CAUSE

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When we talk about “cause and effect,” most of us think of simple chains: one thing happens, then another follows. But Jain philosophy takes this idea much deeper. Unlike other traditions that ask, “How did the universe begin?” Jain thinkers say: the universe has no beginning and no end. What matters is change—how things transform, and what makes that happen.

To explain this, Jainism speaks of five causes (*pañcasamavāya*) that together shape everything we experience.

1. Time (Kāla): Time is the backdrop of all events. Things are born, they last for a while, and then they fade away—because time allows this process. Without time, we could not explain change at all.

2. Nature (Svabhāva): Every object has its own built-in nature. Fire burns, water flows, a seed grows into a tree. These qualities do not come from outside—they are part of what the thing is.

3. Destiny (Niyati): Some say life runs on a fixed script. Destiny means events unfold in a set order, whether we like it or not. If something is meant to happen, it will; if not, no effort can force it.

4. Past Deeds (Pūrvakṛta Karma): This is the idea most of us know: our past actions shape our present. Good deeds bring good results and bad deeds bring suffering. Even siblings born to the same parents can have very different lives, explained by their karma.



5. Human Effort (Puruṣakāra): Effort matters. A field would not grow crops unless someone tills it. Clay would not become a pot unless a potter works on it. Karma may set the stage, but effort is what makes progress possible.

What Jain Thinkers Said

Early Jain philosophers like Siddhasena Divākara and later Ācārya Haribhadra explained that none of these five causes alone can explain everything. Time, nature, or destiny by themselves fall short. Haribhadra especially argued that if destiny ruled all, there would be no room for human effort. If nature alone explained things, everything would happen at once. If time alone ruled, events would occur automatically without conditions. Clearly, that is not how life works.

Haribhadra's Silence on Karma as the Ultimate Cause

One interesting thing to notice about Haribhadra is that, instead of treating past deeds and present effort as two separate causes, he combines them into a single cause—karma. In his view, karma is broad enough to include both what we have done before and what we are doing now. By placing them together under the banner of karma, he shows that our past actions and our present effort are inseparable parts of the same principle.

We saw how Haribhadra carefully dismantles the idea that destiny, nature, or time could be the single ultimate cause of everything. He shows that each of these, taken alone, fails to explain the variety and sequence of events we see in the world. But here is the interesting part: when it comes to karma, Haribhadra says nothing. He does not refute it, does not challenge it, does not even raise a question. And this silence is not accidental—it is deliberate.

Why Silence Matters

So Haribhadra's silence is not weakness—it is strength. By not refuting karma, he highlights its unique status. Karma is not just one explanation among many; it is the governing principle that underlies all causal processes. It is the central principle. It does not need defending, because its authority is already established. His silence is, in fact, an affirmation. Time, nature, and destiny only make sense when seen through the lens of karma.



Karma as the Axis of Causation

Haribhadra himself notes that some philosophers interpret nature and destiny as forms of karma, while others regard them as universal laws. Haribhadra does not endorse these interpretations. Rather, his intent seems to convey that although nature and destiny may shape circumstances, they do so only under the overarching influence of karma.

Haribhadra's approach makes it clear that he wants to elevate karma above the other causes. Time, nature, and destiny may play their roles, but they are subordinate. Karma is the axis around which everything else turns. Unlike destiny, which would make effort meaningless, or nature, which would make all events happen at once, karma preserves the balance. It explains diversity, it allows for effort, and it keeps moral responsibility intact.

Time and Karma: An Open Question

Finally, one unresolved issue: the relationship between time and karma. Does karma influence time, or does time condition karma? Haribhadra leaves this open, consistent with Jainism's broader view that time itself is relative. This humility—acknowledging what remains unanswered—shows the depth of Jain thought.
