

Understanding Jainism by Lawrence A. Babb
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This is a 10th book in UNDERSTANDING FAITH series intended as first read for students of comparative religion and as basic source books of essential information about the major world faiths. The author Lawrence A. Babb is a Professor Emeritus of anthropology and Asian studies at Amherst College, Massachusetts. He is well known to Jains from his numerous trips to India spread over decades, calling Jaipur his second home and his earlier book "Absent Lord" (Ascetics and Kings in a Jain Ritual Culture) and other papers.

In the present work, Professor Babb talks of Jainism as Buddhism's often overlooked cousin but cautions readers to not ignore deep differences between Jain and Buddhist beliefs and practices. In the introduction, the author provides pretty good definition of terms like Jina, Jain, Tirthankars and Tirth. He has relied on two texts: Kalpasutra by Vinaysagarji and Achrang Sutra by Herman Jaobi. Both works are Svetamber texts but it appears that he has also relied heavily on Padmanabh Jaini's writings for balance. At every juncture, the author has been meticulous in noting differences between Svetamber and Digamber beliefs.

The first chapter is devoted to life of Mahavir detailing five auspicious events (*Kalyanaks*) and its significance in Jain beliefs and rituals and describes in detail establishment of four fold social order (*Chaturvidha Sangh*).

The second chapter (the longest one) describes history of Jainism beginning with the Mahavir's era. As is the case with most western scholars, no doubt vastly influenced by Jacobi, this author too goes along with doubts on historicity of existence of Tirthankars other than Parswanath and Mahavir. Their doubt rests on unavailability of archeological evidences - so the chapter begins with Indo Aryans and Vedas. Coming to the Sraman traditions of Buddhism and Jainism, the author states that both Buddha and Mahavir accepted basic doctrines of Karma and Transmigration from the Bramhanical teachings. It is impossible to know how western scholars would reconcile this theory of origination of Jainism if at some future date archeological evidence of Tirthankars of much earlier era is put in their hands. In Babb's defense, he does mention that "From perspective of Jain tradition, Jain teachings are eternal and that they are periodically rediscovered by certain Tirthankars who teach these timeless truths, establish the communities that preserve and put them in practice. Because the cosmos is uncreated and will never end, these teacher establishers are infinite in numbers and come and go for all of infinite time." The chapter continues with story of Mahavir's followers. Brief description of first disciples - eleven Gandhars is followed by noting differences between Svetamber and Digamber traditions. Also noted are the canonical literatures of the two traditions and with the description of Sthanakwasi and Terapanthi movements in later years. He moves on with description of modern day Jains living abroad. He takes note of historical prohibition on Jain mendicants traveling abroad and breaking of that tradition by a Svetamber Muni Chandraprabhsagar (Chitrabhanuji) in 1970, Sthanakvasi monk named Sushil Kumar in 1975 and in 1980 the Terapanthis. He concludes the chapter by wondering aloud if Jainism abroad will ever possess monastic core of the sort seen in India and what effect it will have on followers of Jainism abroad.

The third chapter gets in to the heart of Jainism - "Liberation's Roadmap". It attempts to address questions like what is meant by liberation? Liberation of what and from what? What is the nature of the entity that seeks liberation from the bondage of *Samsara*? Next, Karmik bondage, liberation and 14 *Gunsthanas* are discussed. This chapter is the heart of the book.

In the chapter titled "Strivers" Navkar Mahamantra - the most important prayer for Jains is explained with great reverence. Explaining that five entities deemed worthy of worship (*Arihants, Siddhas, Acharyas, Upadhys and Sadhus*) do not include Gods or Goddesses and all are mendicants who have renounced the world in favor of ascetic life. The author calls this point as fundamental to understanding Jainism.

Emphasising that Jains worship Tirthankars but in principle, all five worthy of veneration are mendicants. And as for Gods and Goddesses, he explains that although they possess extraordinary powers, but in the final analysis they are magnified versions of ourselves for they too are worshipers of the Tirthankars.

After the significance of the Navkar Mantra, life of mendicants is described. Their Five great vows (*Panch Mahavrats*), three curtailments (*Guptis*) and five self regulations (*Samitis*), duty to perform daily essentials (*Avasyaaks*) and interaction with laity are detailed. Mendicants obtaining food in alms rounds (*Gochari*) at the homes of the followers in exquisite details explained as adherence to true Jain conduct. So is mendicants life of austerity, discomfort, inconvenience and severe hardships as "Cultivation and maintenance of a deep equanimity in which one is indifferent to pain and pleasure alike."

After the chapter on the life of mendicants, the author turns his attention to "Supporters" - the lay jains (*Sravaks and Sravikas*) and their religious culture. Ways of worship, Temple visits, rituals, ascetic practices such as fastings, religious festivals, pilgrimages and ritual for terminally ill persons embracing death by self starvation (*Santhara*) etc. are discussed with great respect for traditions.

There is a chapter on Jain biology and Cosmography – author prefers to not use the word cosmology as the term refers to the cosmic origin and he explains that Jains have no such concept. In minute details Jain teachings on time, space and Jain cosmos description of three basic parts – Multilayer Heaven above; Multilayer hell below and a thin disk in between where humans, animals and plants live are described.

The seventh and last chapter describes "social Context" of Jainism and Jains in present day India. Descriptions of various castes (*Khandelval, Oswal and Srimals* etc) make reading the chapter interesting. The book ends with a long but very helpful glossary of Jain terms.

It is heart warming to see new books on Jainism appearing in English indicating welcome rise in awareness of Jainism in the west. Although the book is intended for the students of comparative religions, it may be very valuable resource for new generation of Jains everywhere whose first language is English.