

Sanctuaries of Peace, Reflection, and Community

As a child, I vividly remember my mum taking me to the Jain temple, which we call “Derasar.” I recall the ritual of taking my shoes off before entering, the cool, soothing marble beneath my feet, and how, in an instant, I was transported to a world of calm and peace far removed from the bustling outside. The soft fragrance of incense lingered in the air, and I can still picture my mum using the back of a matchstick to place a small dot of sandalwood paste on my forehead after we prayed. These visits, more than anything, made me understand what it meant to be a Jain and how central the temple was to our community.

Introduction

Jainism, one of the world’s oldest religions, traces its origins to ancient India. It teaches a life of spiritual discipline, ethical living, and self-reflection. At its heart are five core principles that guide followers on the path towards spiritual liberation:

1. **Ahimsa (Nonviolence):** Respect for all living beings, avoiding harm in thought, word, or action.
2. **Satya (Truthfulness):** Honesty and integrity in every aspect of life.

3. **Asteya (Non-stealing):** Taking nothing that is not freely given, honouring others’ belongings.
4. **Brahmacharya (Chastity):** Purity in relationships and self-restraint.
5. **Aparigraha (Non-possessiveness):** Releasing attachment to material things, fostering simplicity.

Jain temples embody these principles. Beyond being spaces for worship, they are sanctuaries for meditation and self-reflection, and their adjoining spaces are often used for community activities. The temples represent the harmonious intersection of spirituality, artistry, and community.



Delwara Temple



Temple Worship

Jain Temple Architecture: A Spiritual and Artistic Marvel

Jain temples, also known as **Derasars**, are architectural masterpieces that reflect precision, craftsmanship, and profound symbolism. Their design follows the principles of **Vastu Shastra**, an ancient Indian architectural science that seeks harmony between human spaces and cosmic energy. Every detail, from the intricate carvings to the upward-ascending spires, serves a deeper spiritual purpose.

The architecture of Jain temples is symbolic of the spiritual journey towards liberation ("moksha"):

- **Shikharas (Spires):** The tall, tapering spires represent the aspirant's journey upwards, striving to transcend worldly attachments and attain spiritual liberation. The towering form reminds worshippers of the soul's ultimate goal.
- **Sanctum Sanctorum (Garbhagriha):** The inner sanctum houses idols of the **Tirthankaras**, enlightened beings who have achieved liberation. This sacred space symbolises the purity and stillness of the soul.
- **Lotus Motifs:** Carvings of lotus flowers adorn the temples, symbolising purity, spiritual upliftment, and the unfolding of enlightenment.
- **Celestial Figures:** Many temples feature intricate depictions of celestial beings and divine guardians, serving as a reminder of the soul's celestial potential.
- **Mandapas (Halls):** Spacious prayer halls symbolise openness, inviting devotees to engage in communal reflection and worship.

Externally, Jain temples are often built from white marble or light-coloured stone, symbolising purity and spiritual elevation. The gleaming, polished surfaces lend the temples an ethereal quality, emphasising inner clarity and peace.



Ranakpur Temple

Iconic Examples of Jain Temple Architecture

Jain temples across India and the world showcase a remarkable variety of architectural styles, each with its unique story and significance:

1. **The Dilwara Temples (Mount Abu, Rajasthan):** Considered masterpieces of marble craftsmanship, the Dilwara Temples date back to the 11th-13th centuries. These temples are renowned for their intricate carvings that depict scenes from Jain mythology, floral patterns, and detailed sculptures of the Tirthankaras. The simplicity of the temple's exterior contrasts with its awe-inspiring interiors, where every inch is adorned with extraordinary detail.
2. **The Palitana Temples (Shatrunjaya Hill, Gujarat):** Perched atop Shatrunjaya Hill, the Palitana complex consists of over 850 temples, built over several centuries. This sacred site is considered one of the holiest Jain pilgrimages, as devotees climb the 3,800 steps to reach the summit—a symbolic act of spiritual ascent and penance. The temples' gleaming white domes create a breathtaking sight against the backdrop of the sky.
3. **Ranakpur Jain Temple (Rajasthan):** Renowned for its geometric precision, the Ranakpur temple boasts 1,444 marble pillars, each uniquely carved. The play of natural light and shadow through the intricate latticework and towering ceilings creates an atmosphere of divine tranquillity.
4. **Shravanabelagola (Karnataka):** Home to the colossal statue of Lord Gomateshwara (Bahubali), this site is a pilgrimage destination where devotees gather to reflect on the virtues of renunciation and self-discipline. The monolithic statue, standing at 57 feet, is a striking symbol of spiritual detachment.



Community Gathering in Oshwal Hall

Spaces for Spiritual Reflection

A Jain temple is not just a place of worship; it is an invitation to pause, reflect, contemplate and reconnect with oneself. From the moment devotees enter, they are enveloped in an atmosphere of serenity—the cool natural stone floors, the soft glow of lamps, and the lingering fragrance of incense create a sense of peace.

Central to Jain temple worship is the presence of the **Tirthankaras** in the sanctum. These revered statues, depicted in meditative postures, are more than idols—they serve as visual guides for devotees, inspiring them to follow the Jain path of nonviolence, truth, and self-realisation.

Rituals in Jain temples are intentionally meditative and contemplative:

- **Lighting incense and offering rice:** These acts symbolise purity, humility, and gratitude, and act as a reminder of the effects of karmic bondage in one's life.
- **Chanting sacred sutras:** Recitation of Jain hymns focuses the mind, fostering mindfulness and inner calm.
- **Meditation:** Devotees engage in silent reflection, seeking to cultivate compassion, self-awareness, self-discipline and detachment.

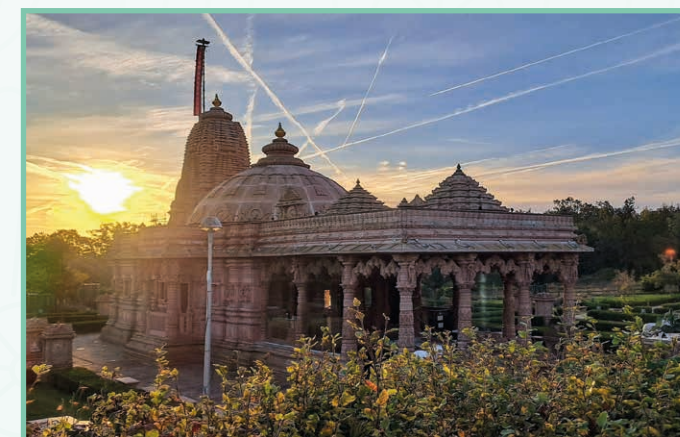
Unlike some religious practices that seek divine favour, Jain temple rituals emphasise personal transformation and ethical living.

Jain Temples as Catalysts for Community Life

Jain temples are vibrant hubs of community life, with its adjoining facilities typically of community halls and grounds, serving as centres for cultural, educational, and charitable activities:

- **Educational Initiatives:** Temples host classes on Jain philosophy, ethics, and meditation, nurturing both spiritual and intellectual growth. These teachings emphasise Jainism's timeless principles of nonviolence, truth, and simplicity.
- **Charitable Activities:** Guided by **ahimsa** (nonviolence) and **aparigraha** (non-possessiveness), Jain communities lead initiatives such as food drives, blood donation camps, and environmental conservation programmes. These efforts reflect the Jain commitment to serving all living beings.
- **Cultural Celebrations:** Festivals like **Paryushana** and **Mahavir Jayanti** bring the community together in celebration, reflection, and renewal. Temples serve as gathering points for weddings, life-cycle ceremonies, and communal meals, fostering a sense of unity and belonging.

The temple's role as a community hub ensures that its influence extends beyond worship, nurturing values of compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and ethical living.



Oshwal Jain Temple

The Jain Temple at Oshwal Centre, UK

The Oshwal Centre in Potters Bar, Hertfordshire, stands as a beacon of Jain faith and cultural heritage in the UK. Built piece by piece with pink sandstone and white marble stones imported from India, the temple is a stunning representation of traditional Jain architecture. Intricate carvings of the Tirthankaras, celestial beings, and symbolic motifs reflect the artistic mastery and spiritual depth synonymous with Jain temples.

Beyond its architectural splendour, the Oshwal Centre fosters a strong sense of community. During festivals like **Paryushana**, the temple comes alive with prayers, rituals, and communal gatherings. The adjoining community hall hosts weddings, educational talks, charity events, and spiritual discourses, making the temple a vital centre for cultural and social connection.

Conclusion

Jain temples are far more than sacred spaces for worship. They are sanctuaries of peace, arenas for self-reflection, and vibrant hubs of community life. Through their awe-inspiring architecture, meditative rituals, and community-driven activities, these temples embody Jainism's core principles: **ahimsa** (nonviolence), **satya** (truthfulness), **asteya** (non-stealing), **brahmacharya** (chastity), and **aparigraha** (non-possessiveness).

For those unfamiliar with Jainism, visiting a Jain temple offers a glimpse into an ancient yet profoundly relevant way of life—one that champions mindfulness, compassion, and ethical living. Jain temples stand as timeless reminders of the power of peace and simplicity in a complex world—principles that continue to inspire and guide millions across generations.

An ancient Indian architectural
science that seeks harmony between
human spaces and cosmic energy

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Ajay Punatar is a Trustee of the Institute of Jainology UK.

Institute of Jainology UK leads the UK Jain communities in representing the Jain faith in government, interfaith collaboration and with major institutions, to bring awareness of the Jain religion.