

Epistemic Non-Absolutism and Contemporary Education: A Jain Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines the Jain epistemology and contemporary educational relevance through the lens of epistemic non-absolutism. The question, how Jain philosophy provides a pluralistic framework for understanding knowledge and learning is answered. A qualitative philosophical method based on textual analysis of classical Jain sources and contemporary theories is used. The paper interprets Jain doctrines in relation to emerging issues of dialogical and inclusive pedagogy. The finding shows that Jain epistemology strengthens conditional reasoning, intellectual humility and recognition of multiple standpoints. These principles support educational practices designed with valuing diversity, respectful dialogue and critical thinking. The study shows that in modern educational contexts, epistemic non-absolutism derived from Jain thought contributes a meaningful philosophical foundation for developing inclusive and reflective learning environments.

Keywords: Jain Epistemology, Anekantavada, Syadvada, Non-absolutism.

Introduction

Jain Philosophy is one of the most ancient philosophical traditions of India (Gupta and Rajput, 2024). Jainism traces its lineage through the 24 Tirthankaras (Burch, 1964, p.69) culminating in Vardhamana Mahavira. Jain deeply believed on ahimsa, anekanta and ethical & disciplined living (De and Tiwari, 2025). Jain systematic metaphysics, logic and epistemology engaged deeply with other Indian schools such as Nyaya, Buddhism and Vedanta. Jain philosophers built a sophisticated Doctrine of knowledge that shaped classical Indian debates on truth and reality (Soni, 2000). Jainism within Indian philosophy made a decisive contribution to epistemology. Through Anekantavada, it insists that reality is complex and cannot be confined to a single viewpoint (Barbato, 2019). Through Syadvada it addressed conditional predication as a method of logic to express partial truths (Bara, 2021). Through the theory of Pramana and Nyaya, it classified the valid knowledge and standpoint based reasoning. While maintaining rational rigor, Jain framework defended plural perspectives. It rejected dogmatism and promoted epistemic humility.

Education today requires a philosophical orientation. Schools serve diverse learners in terms of language, gender, ability, cultural and socio economic background. It requires recognition of multiple ways of knowing. Jain epistemology offers this foundation. Anekantavada validates diversity of perspectives. Syadvada supports context sensitive evaluation. The theory of Pramana emphasizes varied cognitive abilities. Epistemic non-absolutism therefore becomes a strong conceptual basis in creating inclusive classrooms grounded in equity, dialogue and respect.

Philosophical Foundations of Jain Theory of Knowledge

Jainism has its origin from Bhagwan Rishabh Dev or Adinath, the first Tirthankar of the present Avasarpini, time cycle (Jain, 2009, p. 3). Jain cosmology sees time as beginning less and cyclical with twenty four Tirthankars resending in each half cycle. They are to guide beings toward moksha (Burch, 1964, p.70). In the current descending cycle the tradition culminated historically with Bhagwan Mahavir in the sixth century BCE, who consolidated metaphysical doctrine, ethical discipline and epistemology within the broader landscape of Bharat Darshan. The 24th Tirthankara of Jainism Mahavira (599-527 BCE.) was born in present day Bihar, northern India and known as the founder of Jainism (Anbazhagan, 2022) and lived during the time of Gautama Buddha. Jain philosophy preaches that one must get over the negative tendencies of human nature to realize truth (De and Tiwari, 2025). Jainism explains the universe through the interaction of Jiva and Ajiva, the living principle and the non living substances (Jain, 2022). The linkage between the soul and Ajiva leads to change and worldly existence. When the soul irradiates all karmic bondage linked to Ajiva it retains its pure state and get liberated known as Mukti.

Jainism is based on strict self discipline and self control (De and Tiwari, 2025). It encourages constructive thought and conduct. It observes Ahimsa as a central value and extends respect and dignity to all forms of existence including non living entities (Jain, 2019).

Ontological Pluralism and the Doctrine of Anekantavada

As a form of mithyatva Jain philosophers critique Ekantavada a false and one sided apprehension of tattva. Any claim to one and exclusive truth rejects the complex nature of dravya, which possesses infinite modes and attributes (Savithri, 2023). Such absolutism rejects alternative naya, leads to intellectual rigidity and strengthens kashaya, hence generate conditions for himsa (Islam, 2020). To reject this, Jainism establishes Anekantavada as an ontological and epistemological doctrine. It ascertains that reality is multifaceted and can be expressed through conditional predication or syadvada. By recognizing the partial validity of diverse standpoints it cultivates samyak jnana and supports ahimsa at the level of discourse and thought. Umasvati, during 2nd to 3rd century CE composed the Tattvarthasutra and systematized Jain ontology and epistemology, later which formed the foundation for articulation of Anekantavada. Siddhasena Divakara, in the 5th century CE elaborated logical aspects of many sidednesses in the Nyayavatara. Through systematic logic Akalanka, in the 8th century CE strengthened the epistemological defence of Jain non-absolutism. In the 9th century CE Vidyandandi, further refined the doctrinal and argumentative framework supporting Anekāntavāda. Hemacandra, in Anyayoga-vyavacchedika presented a comprehensive exposition of non-absolutism consolidating its mature philosophical form (Gupta & Rajput, 2025).

Figure: 1. Medieval Jain temple Anekantavada doctrine artwork photographed by Walter Benz, Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Medieval_Jain_temple_Anekantavada_doctrine_artwork.jpg



Anekantavada explains many aspects and no single viewpoint captures the whole truth. The story of the seven blind men and the elephant illustrates this principle. Each person touches a different part and forms a partial conclusion (Radhakrishnan, 1923). The total reality remains larger than any one perception only. It reflects the idea that one reality appears in many ways depending on perspective. Anekantavada teaches that truth is conditional and based on context.

Conditional Predication and the Logic of Syadvada

In Jain philosophy reality has three dimensions. It involves substance, its attributes and its changing natures. Human understanding cannot capture the whole truth at a time. It experiences reality from a particular standpoint known as *naya*. Each *naya* highlights one aspect of the object. *Paryaya naya* focuses on change only. *Dravya naya* focuses on substance only. *Vyavahara naya* views practical experience. *Nischaya naya* considers the deeper or ultimate level of truth. *Syadvada* is a central principle of Jain epistemology. It sees truth appears in different ways depending on perspective, context and conditions. Each viewpoint reflects only a part of the whole. By using the term *syat*, meaning in a certain sense (Koller, 2000, p. 404) Jain thinkers remind us that knowledge is limited and conditional. Reality is complex and multi dimensional (Radhakrishnan, 1923, p.302). Therefore affirmation and denial both depend on viewpoint. Through *Saptabhanganaya*, the sevenfold mode of predication *Syadvada* illustrates a balanced approach to understanding truth (Bara, 2021). Seven different statements can be drawn on the reality of a particular thing (De Zoysa, 2018).

- Syad asti. it exists from a certain viewpoint
- Syad nasty. it does not exist.
- Syad asti nasti. From one perspective, it exists and from another it does not.
- Syad avaktavya. It cannot be expressed in definite words.
- Syad asti avaktavya. From one aspect, it exists and cannot be clearly described.
- Syad nasti avaktavya. From one viewpoint it does not exist and remains indescribable.
- Syad asti nasti avaktavya. From different standpoints, it exists, it does not exist and indescribable.

Theory of Pramana and Hierarchy of Knowing

According to the Jaina theory of knowledge, knowledge is broadly classified into two categories.

- Valid knowledge
- Fallacious knowledge

Jain epistemology recognizes five means of acquiring knowledge. These are *Mati*, *Sruti*, *Avadhi*, *Manahpariyaya* and *Kevala*. The first two forms, *Mati* and *Sruti* are considered indirect knowledge because they arise through sensory perception, cognition and verbal testimony. The remaining

three Avadhi, Manahparyaya and Kevala are regarded as direct knowledge as they evolve through intuitive awareness and immediate.

Among these five, the first three are imperfect means of knowledge because they involve certain limitations in perception and understanding. The last two forms represent perfect knowledge as they reveal reality without distortion or error.

Implications for Contemporary Educational Practice Epistemic Pluralism through Anekantavada

Anekantavada affirms that dravya possesses infinite attributes and modes and no single naya can grasp the whole of reality. This principle supports epistemic pluralism by encouraging recognition of multiple viewpoints in knowledge creation. Teachers can present diverse interpretations of texts, cultures and histories while guiding students to appreciate the partial validity of each perspective. Teacher can broaden the mind of the students by integrating multiple domains of knowledge.

Critical Thinking through Syādvāda

Through Saptabhangi-naya, learners recognize that affirmation and negation depend on standpoint and context. In educational practice this logic develops a sense of analytical and critical thinking skills among students. Students prioritize evaluate arguments before accepting absolute claims. Such training discourages mithyatva and promotes balanced reasoning, enabling learners to approach knowledge with openness, reflective understanding and careful judgment.

Diverse Ways of Knowing through Pramana

The Jain classification of knowledge recognizes different levels of awareness and cognition. This framework in present educational scenario validates diverse learning capacities among students. Some learners acquire knowledge through perception and reasoning while others develop deeper insight through experience and reflection. By addressing multiple mediates of knowing teachers can design inclusive pedagogies to respect different cognitive paths and support the gradual development of Samyak jnana.

Dialogical Learning through Naya

The Jain doctrine of Naya stressed on standpoint based understanding where each claim speaks only a partial aspect of truth. This principle in present education encourages dialogical learning. Classroom debates and discussion allow students to explore different Naya before drawing conclusions. It helps students acknowledge the conditional nature of knowledge and appreciate diverse interpretations.

Ahimsa in Educational Ethics

Jain epistemic value closely linked with the ethical principle of Ahimsa. Just as physical harm arises from uncontrolled kasaya, intellectual rigidity may create conflict in discourse. Anekantavada and Syadvada in educational contexts encourage learners practice restraint in judging and respect others viewpoints.

Conclusion

A profound philosophical base has been contributed by Jain epistemology for rethinking the structure of contemporary education. With the philosophy of Anekantavada it affirms the many sided nature of truth and motivates openness to diverse viewpoints. Syadvada nurtures critical reflection and guards against epistemic absolutism by introducing conditional reasoning. It

recognizes varied modes and standpoints of getting knowledge closely relevant with the goals of inclusive and learner-centered education. In an increasingly diverse and interconnected world Jain epistemic non-absolutism shows a valuable pathway for classrooms that value ethical discourse, diversity and respectful knowledge creation. Jain epistemic approach transforms education into a space where variety of voices coexists and knowledge becomes a shared pursuit of truth.

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