

Format for a National ICH Inventory (India)

1. Basic Identification Details

Element Name Official title of the ICH element (in local language and English)

AAHARCHARYA OF DIGAMBARA JAIN ASCETICS: A MONASTIC PRACTICE OF NON-VIOLENCE AND RENUNCIATION.

Unique ID Code:

For systematic tracking (e.g., "ICH-IN-001" for India).

Location(s): ICH-IN-001

Geographic Regions, Communities, and Localities Where the Element Is Practiced

Aaharcharya is practiced throughout India within Digambara Jain communities. As Digambara Jain ascetics (munis) do not reside permanently in one location—except during the four-month period of Chaturmasa—the practice is observed wherever the monks travel and stay temporarily. Consequently, Aaharcharya is not confined to a single village or region but is dynamically practiced across diverse geographic areas in accordance with the movement of the ascetic community.

In India, Digambara Jain communities are concentrated in both urban and rural areas, particularly in the states of Madhya Pradesh, the Bundelkhand region, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Gujarat. These regions continue to serve as significant centers for the transmission and observance of Digambara monastic traditions, including Aaharcharya.

In South India, especially in Tamil Nadu, and in several northern Indian states, the movement of Nirgrantha (sky-clad) Digambara ascetics is comparatively limited due to climatic, social, and infrastructural challenges. Nevertheless, wherever Digambara Jain ascetics are present, the practice of Aaharcharya is observed in accordance with established monastic norms, ensuring the continuity of this living intangible cultural heritage.

Domain:

UNESCO's five ICH domains:

Social practices, rituals, festive events

2. Description of the Element

Detailed Summary:

- o Historical background, significance, and cultural meaning
- o How it is performed/practiced (step-by-step if applicable)

[?] Associated Objects & Spaces:

Tools, costumes, instruments, or places linked to the element

Historical Background :

Aaharcharya is the traditional and highly disciplined practice governing the method of food intake by Digambara Jain ascetics, deeply rooted in Jain ethical and spiritual philosophy. According to Jain scriptures, the origins of this practice date back to Lord Rishabhanatha, the first Tirthankara, during the Fourth Time Cycle (Chaturtha Kaal), when agriculture and cooking were not yet prevalent. The foundational event occurred when King Shreyans of Hastinapur offered sugarcane juice to Lord Rishabhanatha after a prolonged fast, an event commemorated annually as Akshaya Tithi and regarded as the inception of Aaharcharya.

The practice was preserved and transmitted through the lineages of all twenty-four Tirthankaras, with Lord Mahavira (6th century BCE) establishing a structured monastic order emphasizing strict adherence to food-related disciplinary rules. Subsequent Jain Acharya, including Bhadrabahu (3rd century BCE) and Kundakunda Acharya, further codified these principles into formal monastic regulations.

Aaharcharya embodies core Jain values such as non-violence, purity, restraint, and mindfulness, and functions as a living cultural heritage sustained through oral transmission, ritual observance, and daily practice. Today, it continues to be uniformly observed by Digambara Jain ascetics, reflecting its enduring continuity and cultural significance.

Significance :

1) Spiritual Significance (आध्यात्मिक महत्त्व)

Food as a means, not pleasure: to sustain the body for spiritual progress.

Reduction of passions: weakens attachment, greed Equanimity: Accepting whatever pure food is offered without preference.

2) Highest level of non-violence: Saints accept simple, vegetarian, non-processed food. No consumption of root vegetables, fermented food, or food involving high Minimal harm to living beings: Food is taken once a day.

3) Unique Āhārcharyā Practices

a) Hand-based eating (पात्र रहित आहार) :Digamber saints do not use utensils.Food is taken directly in the hands, symbolizing:Complete renunciation (अपरिग्रह).b)

Standing posture (खड़े होकर आहार)

Eating while standing ensures:No indulgence, Continuous alertness and discipline

4. Ethical & Social Significance

Interdependence of Shravak and Sadhu:Householders gain पुण्य (merit) by offering food with purity.

Saints guide society spiritually.Promotion of restraint(sanyam) in society ,Lay followers learn moderation, gratitude, and discipline.

5 Psychological & Mental Discipline

Control over hunger strengthens:Willpower ,Patience, Mindfulness

Eating is done silently and consciously, enhancing आत्म-निरीक्षण (self-awareness).

6 Health & Lifestyle Balance (Secondary Outcome)

Though not the primary aim, this dietary pattern:Encourages simple, sattvic food ,Prevents overconsumption,Supports a light, disciplined body suitable for austerities (तप)

7 Philosophical Meaning

Food becomes an instrument of spiritual purification, not survival alone.The practice reflects the Jain ideal:

“आहार भी साधना है” – Eating itself is a form of spiritual practice

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Cultural Meaning of Aaharcharya

The Aaharcharya of Digamber Jain saints is a living cultural expression of Jain philosophy, where food, body, space, and society harmoniously unite to embody the core values of Ahimsa (non-violence), Aparigraha (non-possession), Samyama (self-restraint), and the Moksha-marg (path to liberation). It is not merely a dietary discipline but a sacred ritual that transforms the act of eating into a conscious spiritual practice, reinforcing humility, interdependence, and reverence for all forms of life.

This tradition preserves Jain identity through strict ethical conduct, ritual purity, and community participation, while simultaneously offering a universal model of

responsible and mindful living. By limiting food intake to minimal, hand-received, and non-accumulative consumption, Aaharcharya actively addresses issues of over-consumption, waste, and ecological imbalance.

In contemporary times, its principles resonate strongly with global concerns such as sustainability, ethical eating, and environmental consciousness. The cultural meaning of Aaharcharya thus remains timeless, transmitting ancient wisdom that continues to guide humanity toward compassionate and balanced coexistence. Its cultural meaning remains timeless and globally relevant.

How it is performed/practiced (step-by-step if applicable)

The nine steps of Navdha Bhakti are as follows:

Pratigrahan (Padgahan): The process where the donor, holding appropriate items like a kalash (pot) and fruits, respectfully invite the saint into their home/designated area (Chauka), saying specific phrases like "Namostu" (for Acharyas/Munis) or "Vandami" (for Aryikas) and "Atra, atra, atra" (here, here, here) and "Tishth, tishth, tishth" (stop, stop, stop).

Uchhasan: Offering the saint a high or pure seat/platform (pata) to stand upon during the meal.

Paad Prakshalan: Washing the saint's feet with pure water (Prasuk jal), as a mark of devotion.

Poojan/Archana: Worshipping the saint as a manifestation of pure conduct (a living Jina or Tirthankara in spirit).

नमस्कार (Namaskar): Offering salutations with folded hands, often after the initial invitation.

Man Shuddhi: Purity of the mind. The donor should have a clean conscience and the highest devotion.

Vachan Shuddhi: Purity of speech. The donor must use appropriate, respectful language throughout the process.

Kaay Shuddhi: Purity of the body. The donor should be physically clean, wear clean clothes, and maintain a pure environment.

Aahar-Jal Shuddhi: Ensuring the food and water offered are pure (freshly prepared within the 24-hour limit, free from life forms, etc.) and suitable for a monk's strict vows.

Observing Navdha Bhakti is considered a great source of religious merit (punya) in Jainism, as offering pure food to a deserving ascetic is one of the highest forms of daan (charity). The saint, in turn, has specific conditions or "vidhis" (vows taken that day) which must align with the donor's offerings, otherwise, they will move on to the next house.

After all this steps digamber jain saint if naked will take food in standing position in their hand whatever laity will offer to them 32 morsels only.

If Aryika I. e. female nun will take food in the same way but in sitting position. All these process are similar

As per Ranking, lower rank sadhu will take food in a bowl in sitting position.

There are 32 type of restrictions all of them had to follow.

For example : if seen a piece of hair or an ant in the food the saints will skip food at the same moment and will get food only next day.

Tools, costumes, instruments, or places linked to the element

Associated Objects & Spaces:

Associated objects:

1) Hands (कर-पात्र / हस्त-पात्र)

The only medium for receiving and consuming food.

Symbol of absolute renunciation (अपरिग्रह) and non-possession.

Reinforces equality between the body and food—no external dependency.

2)Pichhi (पिच्छी)

Soft broom made of peacock feathers.

Used before and after āhār to gently remove minute living beings, ensuring subtle ahimsa being always in the hands of saints

3) Kamandal / Water Gourd (कमण्डलु)

For carrying pure water, used sparingly.

Reflects disciplined use of essentials only.

4)Pure Cooked Food (शुद्ध भिक्षा आहार)

Simple, freshly prepared, within limited time period,vegetarian food, prepared strictly after sunrise before sunset.

Free from root vegetables, fermentation, night-cooked items, or additives.

5) All kitchen equipments for preparation of food. In some groups electrical appliances for food preparation are not allowed so manual equipments are needed.Like mortar and pestle instead of mixer.

Associated Spaces (संबद्ध स्थान)

Shravak's Home (श्रावक गृह) : Food is offered by lay householders with purity of body, mind, and intention. The kitchen becomes a temporary ...sacred space during āahār-dān

Threshold / Courtyard (देहरी / आंगन) : Saints often receive food inside the home. only that time they can visit lay follower's house. It symbolizes non-attachment and non-intrusion.

Open, Clean Ground (स्वच्छ खुला स्थान) : Extreme Sunlight to see food whether it includes living minute organisms or hair.

Āahār is taken standing, in a clean, unobstructed area.

Avoids comfort, seating, or enclosed indulgent spaces.

Chaturmas or Temporary Halt Spaces (चातुर्मास स्थल) :

During monsoon stay, specific areas are designated for regulated movement and āahār, ensuring maximum non-violence

3. Community Involvement

Practitioner(s)/[Bearer](#)(s):

Names of key individuals/groups (with consent)

☐ Community Role:

How the community participates in transmission/preservation

Family and community influence : From a young age Jain individuals are taught the principles of Jainism by their families and within their community. Dietary habits are often instilled in the children through familial practices and cultural norms. Parents and elders pass down their knowledge and adherence to Jain dietary guidelines ensuring continuity across generations.

Religious practices and rituals : Jain Saints serve as spiritual leaders within the community embodying the highest ideals of Jainism through their lifestyle and practices. Rituals such as fasting and specific food offerings during religious ceremonies further reinforce the importance of dietary discipline in Jainism.

Education and discourse : Jainism places a strong emphasis on education and philosophical discourse. Scholars and religious leaders engage in teachings and discussions about Jain principles including dietary guidelines. Through Lectures, Sermons, Seminars, written materials the knowledge of Jain dietary habits is disseminated and preserved across generations.

The religious texts and teachings of Jainism :

The dietary habits are primarily derived from the religious texts and teachings of Jainism particularly the AAGAMS.

These text outlines the principles on nonviolence which forms the foundation of Jain dietary practices. The teachings emphasize compassion and respect for all living beings, leading to strict dietary restrictions aimed at minimizing harm to living beings.

4. Viability & Threats

Adaptation and evolution : While the core principles of Jain dietary habits remain unchanged there is also room for adaptation and evolution over time. Jain communities migrate and interact with diverse cultures dietary practices may undergo slight modifications while adhering to the fundamental values of nonviolence and compassion.

Current Status

(Active / Endangered / Revived)

Status: Active (Viable)

The Āhārcharyā of Digamber Jain saints is a living and actively practiced tradition. It continues to be regularly observed by Digamber Jain monks as an integral part of their ascetic life, spiritual discipline, and ethical conduct. The practice is transmitted through formal monastic training, lived example, and community participation, particularly during daily practices, pilgrimage periods, and the Chaturmas stay.

The element remains socially recognized and culturally respected within the Jain community. Lay followers (śrāvakas and śrāvikās) actively participate by preparing food in accordance with strict ethical and ritual norms, thereby ensuring intergenerational continuity and collective responsibility for safeguarding the practice.

However, the Āhārcharyā is practiced by a limited and specialized group due to its rigorous discipline, strict vows, and the changing socio-economic context of contemporary society. While it is not endangered, it is contextually sensitive, requiring continued community support, documentation, and awareness-building to ensure its sustainability.

☐ Threats:

Challenges such as globalization, lack of transmission, or funding issues

Challenges in Maintaining Traditional Methods : The traditional practices of selective food intake among Digambar Jain saints face challenges in modern urban settings, necessitating innovative adaptations to sustain their ascetic lifestyle which is minimal to adapt.

Community changing with time and Food Practices : The dietary practices of Digambar Jain saints are influenced by the social and economic growth within Jain communities .How it affects the relationship between laity and saints will be studied

Health and Nutrition Perspectives : The strict food intake methods of Digambar Jain saints, though rooted in ascetic discipline, align with modern insights into minimalism and fasting is beneficial for physical and spiritual well-being.

Urban Challenges to Ascetic Food Practices : The transition from rural to urban settings challenges the traditional practices of Digambar Jain saints, as urban households may have limited understanding or resources to provide suitable food, lack of knowledge that align with ascetic dietary restrictions.

Division/Diversification of society / Shrinking Communities : Now a days the society is not strictly following jain aspects due to inter societal marriages to keep the continuity of food practices is becoming difficult.

Impact of urbanization on the distribution and availability of jain lay followers willing to participate in traditional food giving practices.By Exploring changes in numbers and density of jain households in rural verses urban.

Historical Continuity : Study textual and oral traditions related to food intake practices of Digambar Jain saints for historical continuity.

Modern Adaptations : Explore how urbanization, shrinking communities, and modern logistics affect their food practices.

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[?] Safeguarding Measures:

Existing or proposed actions (e.g., workshops, documentation)

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More and more awareness programs are needed to be shared to let people know proper Aaharcharya.

Four days workshops for What why and How this Aaharcharya should be done. Documentation is still needed to share methods of Aaharcharya with people around so that Digamber Jain Saints gets daily food aligned with jain principles.

Books written on Aaharcharya explains how this practises should be helped to be followed by jain saints under their guidance.

Modes of Engagement : Through discourse and sermons

Saints deliver regular lectures Elaborating on the philosophical and practice aspects of aaharcharya .

Through Religious Events : During Ashtanika and Paryushan Festivals Saints preach and engaged deeply with communities through 10 days shibirs giving them practice knowledge through personal experiments by lay people.

Adaptations to modernity :Saints help interpret ancient guidelines in context of modernity following strict principles of Jainism Ahimsa and Celibacy.

Unity and Inspiation:Dialogue between saints and communities will strengthen sense of collective responsibility and inspiration to individuals.

Continuity for generations : By addressing younger audiences and incorporating modern examples ,saints can ensure that jain food ethics remain intact for years together across generations.

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5. Documentation & Media

[?] Photos / Videos / Audio:

High-quality records (with permissions)

[?] References:

Publications, research papers, or prior documentation

Codification in jain scriptures

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