

Ajivika Sect, Philosophy, Decline, UPSC Notes

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The Ajivika Sect was an ascetic group that emerged in India around the same time as Buddhism and Jainism and lasted until the 14th century. Central to the Ajivikas' belief system was the idea that everything is predetermined by fate, or *niyati*, which suggested that **human actions do not influence outcomes**.

The Ajivika Sect reached its peak during the reign of Mauryan Emperor **Bindusara**. Notably, Ashoka, renowned for promoting Buddhism throughout India and Southeast Asia, spent much of his early life as an Ajivik. However, after this period, the Ajivika Sect lost its influence in northern India and gradually became insignificant.

Ajivika Sect Background

Ajivika Sect is an ancient ascetic group that emerged in India around the same time as Buddhism and Jainism, lasting until the 14th century. The Sect is characterized by its belief in total determinism regarding the transmigration of souls, or the cycle of rebirths

- **Founder:** The Ajivika Sect believed to be founded by **Makkhali Goshala** in the 5th century BCE, was contemporary with the Buddha and Mahavira. Along with Buddhism and Jainism, Ajivikism opposed the sacrificial rituals of Brahmanical religion and the monistic theories of the Upanishads, highlighting their

common beliefs.

- The only remaining evidence of the lost Ajivika sect can be found in the **Barabar Caves of Gaya**. An inscription in the **Sudama Cave** indicates that Ashoka assigned four caves on Barabar Hill to Ajivika monks in 261 BCE.
 - Additionally, another inscription on **Nagarjuni Hill**, attributed to Ashoka's grandson **Dasaratha Maurya**, reveals that the Ajivikas continued to receive imperial patronage from the Mauryan dynasty for an extended period.

Ajivika Sect Philosophy

The Ajivika sect offers a deterministic and materialistic framework, sharply contrasting with the karma and liberation concepts in other Indian traditions. Its focus on fate and rejection of individual agency highlights its significance as a distinct school of thought in ancient Indian philosophy.

- **Fatalism:** The Ajivika Sect's philosophy centres on the Niyati doctrine, emphasizing absolute fatalism and determinism—**everything is preordained**, and free will is denied.
 - They believe fate guides individuals toward liberation (moksha) from the cycle of birth and rebirth, rejecting karma as a fallacy while affirming that each being possesses an atman, resonating with Vedic and Jain beliefs.
- **Atomism:** The Ajivika Sect proposed a theory of elements akin to the **Vaisheshika school**, positing that everything consists of tiny atoms, with characteristics arising from their combinations, all influenced by cosmic forces.
- **Theism:** The sect's atheistic stance denies a creator deity and a mystical end for the cosmos, though it recognizes a material form of the soul (Atman), which undergoes numerous rebirths before reaching its predestined nirvana (salvation).
- **Antinomian Ethics:** Buddhist texts describe the Ajivika philosophy as antinomian, claiming no objective moral laws exist. All beings are seen as powerless, shaped by destiny and nature, experiencing joy and sorrow randomly.
 - Despite this, accounts suggest Ajivikas led ascetic lives, often practising Ahimsa (non-violence) and vegetarianism.

Ajivika Sect Decline

After the decline of the Maurya Empire in the 2nd century BCE, the Ajivika Sect was mentioned only occasionally in Sanskrit literature and seemed to lose its prominence among other sects.

- By the Shunga period in the 1st century BCE, they had become insignificant in northern India, though stray references suggest they may have persisted until the 15th century.
- During the Gupta period, the Ajivika Sect's practices had changed significantly, indicating a rapid decline.
- Moreover, the 14th-century text *Sarva-Darshana-Sangraha* does not mention the Ajivika Sect, further reflecting the dissolution of their sect.

Ajivika Sect UPSC PYQs

Question 1: With reference to the history of Indian rock-cut architecture, consider the following statements:
(UPSC Prelims 2013)

1. The caves at Badami are the oldest surviving rock-cut caves in India
2. The Barabar rock-cut caves were originally made for Ajivikas by Emperor Chandragupta Maurya.
3. At Ellora, caves were made for different faiths.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

1. 1 only
2. 2 and 3 only
3. 3 only
4. 1, 2 and 3

Answer: c

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