

## ARTICLES

# Jainism and the LGBTQ+ Community

Holland McCasland<sup>1a</sup><sup>1</sup> University of North Texas

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Jain doctrine has traditionally recognized three genders as well as differences in biological sex and sexual orientation. This essay investigates the relevance of these Jain concepts to contemporary LGBTQ+ issues. On one hand, Jainism's clear recognition of a third gender and overt focus on non-harm results in a tolerant approach toward gender and sexual diversity. On the other, Jainism's equally overt focus on asceticism, with celibacy being the ultimate ideal for all people regardless of gender or sex, means that the Jain concepts may not align with the interests and priorities of contemporary LGBTQ+ communities broadly speaking.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and more, also known as LGBTQ+, refers to a person's sexual orientation and/or gender identity. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, "gender" refers to language categories that are "partly arbitrary but also partly based on distinguishable characteristics."<sup>1</sup> Jain teachings have traditionally recognized the existence of a third gender or neuter-sex (napuṃsaka), alongside male gender (puṃ-liṅga) and female gender (strī-liṅga).<sup>2</sup> "Gender" in the Jain context can refer to grammatical gender as well as gender roles and gender identity. The three genders are related to other Jain teachings on the existence of desires (vedas), which differentiate between desires for women (puṃ-veda), desires for men (strī-veda), and desires for both men and women (napuṃsaka-veda).<sup>3</sup>

I plan to explore the possible relevance of traditional Jain views on gender and desire for addressing contemporary issues facing the LGBTQ+ community in the United States. Even though Jain doctrines recognize a third gender, which opens the conversation for gender-related struggles relating to the transgender community in the contemporary US, their dedication to asceticism makes expressing and exploring the queer aspects of identity complicated. How

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a Holland McCasland studies visual arts at the University of North Texas and wrote this essay for PHIL 3630 Jainism in the spring semester of 2025.

1 See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gender>.

2 Umāsvāti, *Tattvārtha Sūtra*, 2.50.

3 Wiley, *The A to Z of Jainism*, 90.

does Jainism's ultimate focus on the goal of total asceticism relate to the exploration of sexuality and gender identities in contemporary LGBTQ+ contexts?

## What is Transgender?

The term transgender has existed since the mid 1960s and has meant different things throughout the years in the US context.<sup>4</sup> During the 70s and 80s, it typically meant someone who wanted to change not only their day-to-day clothes but also wanted to change their gender socially.<sup>5</sup> During the 90s, it referred to any variation from gender norms and expectations.<sup>6</sup> Lately however, it has been taken to only refer to people who identify with a binary gender other than the one assigned to them at birth—which is what “transsexual” used to mean.<sup>7</sup> Because transgender as a word has meant different things during different periods of time, it can be difficult to compare this experience to that of a third gender in Jainism.

If we were to use the dominant meaning of transgender from the 1990s, I would venture to say that third gender applies, but if we are using the more recent meaning of transgender, it becomes a lot more complicated. That is, nowadays there are many more terms that refer to the different gender identities and expressions such as “nonbinary.” “Binary gender” refers to the idea that there are two genders, male and female.<sup>8</sup> Therefore nonbinary would imply that a person does not identify with either male or female, or rather, that they do not fit inside the gender binary. The term nonbinary can also describe the concept of a third gender because third gender is not being one sex and changing to another sex; it is the belief that male and female are not the only options.

## History of the Third Gender

In many religions and cultures, people have recognized the existence of a third gender. In Jainism, their third gender has come to be known as *napūnisaka*, which literally translates to “not-a-male” and refers to a person who is neither male nor female.<sup>9</sup> According to Kristi L. Wiley in *The A to Z of Jainism*, “The biological genders are the result of a variety of karma that is responsible for

<sup>4</sup> For a broader discussion of gender categories outside the US and especially in India, see works such as Serena Nanda, *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990), Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), and Vaibhav Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India* (New York: Fordham, 2021), as well as the edited volume by Veena R. Howard, *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Philosophy and Gender* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> McNabb, *Nonbinary Gender Identities: History, Culture, Resources*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Zwilling and Sweet, “‘Like a City Ablaze’: The Third Sex and the Creation of Sexuality in Jain Religious Literature” 362.

the formation of the body (nāma-karma).”<sup>10</sup> The concept of a third gender or third biological sex has not just been part of Jain belief, but of Indian people altogether since the late Vedic period.<sup>11</sup>

The understanding of a third category gains complexity when combined with Jain views on desire, asceticism, and women’s liberation.<sup>12</sup> In particular, the third gender in Jainism is connected to their views on homosexuality and even more so tied to the historical discussion about whether women are capable of liberation.<sup>13</sup> The end goal of all Jain people is to attain liberation, and discussions of gender are often related to who can and cannot attain mokṣa. Within Jainism there are two schools of thought—those that say women can attain liberation (Śvetāmbaras) and those that say women cannot attain liberation (Digambaras). Because they have differing opinions on whether women can be liberated, they must first differentiate between women and men and the third gender.<sup>14</sup>

After the Vedic period ended around 600 B.C.E. the Jains began developing terms to make such differentiations. “In addition to the aforementioned *napuṃsaka*, there is also the *klība*, or the sexually defective man and the *paṇḍaka*, perhaps originally meaning ‘impotent’ or ‘sterile,’ both of whom are associated with transvestism and dancing.”<sup>15</sup> Along with the *klība* and *paṇḍaka* were long-haired men, also known as *keśavan*. All of these were recognized as males and not females; however, due to their gender nonconformity and/or impotence, they were also seen as not truly males.<sup>16</sup>

The late Śvetāmbara scripture known as the *Bhāgavatī Aradhana* introduces another category called *puruṣanapuṃsaka*.<sup>17</sup> These people are essentially indistinguishable from “normal” or gender-appropriate men, but they are classed as *napuṃsakas* due to their sexual desire for men.<sup>18</sup> These *puruṣanapuṃsakas* were capable of being ordained because they look like gender-conforming men, thus overriding their sexual orientation. Ultimately, these distinctions were relevant not to the exploration of diverse sexualities and gender identities but to deciding how to separate the genders within

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<sup>10</sup> Wiley, *The A to Z of Jainism*, 90.

<sup>11</sup> Zwilling and Sweet, “Like a City Ablaze,” 362.

<sup>12</sup> See Howard, “Broadening Horizons: Hindu and Jain Texts and Debates on Gender Fluidity and Gender Hybridity,” 81–82.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, “Homosexuality (Jainism),” 566.

<sup>14</sup> For more context on women’s liberation in Jainism, see Padmanabh S. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> Zwilling and Sweet, “Like a City Ablaze,” 363–64.

<sup>16</sup> Zwilling and Sweet, “Like a City Ablaze,” 365.

<sup>17</sup> Zwilling and Sweet, “Like a City Ablaze,” 370.

<sup>18</sup> Zwilling and Sweet, “Like a City Ablaze,” 370.

renunciant orders so as to avoid sexual temptations within communities of monks and nuns. In short, Jainism's views regarding gender and sexuality are in service to its ultimate focus on asceticism and renunciation.

### **Sexual Desires, Celibacy, and LGBTQ+**

As mentioned earlier, the final goal of Jain practice is to reach mokṣa. Jainism teaches that the way to attain liberation is by renouncing all pleasures and pains through asceticism and eliminating all karmas, including good karmas. While the life of a mendicant is the ideal for Jain people, the number of mendicants tends to be quite small.<sup>19</sup> When becoming a monk or nun, there are five vows of restraint that must be taken, the mahāvratas: the vow of non-harming (ahiṃsā), the vow of truthfulness (satya), the vow of “taking only that which is given” (asetya), the vow of celibacy (brahmacarya), and the vow of non-possession (aparigraha).<sup>20</sup> These vows can also be taken by lay people in which they are called aṇuvratas and are less restrictive.<sup>21</sup> Not all lay people will take those vows, but they also recognize that they will not attain liberation in this reincarnation. “While a mendicant’s life is focused on the destruction of all karma, a householder’s life is focused on well-being in this life and a good rebirth in the next.”<sup>22</sup> Lay people understand that they will not reach mokṣa in this life and so they spend their time trying to accumulate good karmas in order to be reborn in an ideal situation.<sup>23</sup>

Does the Jain idea of a third gender benefit contemporary LGBTQ+ conversations today, or does the fact that their final goal of attaining mokṣa by way of celibacy make it irrelevant? The main and arguably most important part of Jainism is a dedication to ahiṃsā, or non-violence. A recent blog post at a Jain website explains that if Jain people “discriminate, ostracize, outcast, gossip towards anyone who is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender,”<sup>24</sup> then they are creating hiṃsā (violence) towards the LGBTQ+ community. To keep up with the Jain views on non-violence, this blog urges Jain readers to be accepting and non-judgmental of different genders and sexualities. At a minimum, Jainism is relevant to LGBTQ+ conversations for this reason.

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<sup>19</sup> Wiley, *The A to Z of Jainism*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Wiley, *The A to Z of Jainism*, 135.

<sup>21</sup> Wiley, *The A to Z of Jainism*, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Wiley, *The A to Z of Jainism*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Wiley, *The A to Z of Jainism*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Jainism: Know It, Understand It & Internalize It, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender—What Is the Jain Thing to Do?” (unauthored blog post).

## Conclusion

As the blog post above makes clear, being discriminatory against queer people simply goes against Jain values.<sup>25</sup> However, the conversation becomes complex because of those same values. Though not all Jain people will take the five vows of restraint (aṇuvratas), all mendicants will take the mahāvratas. One of those five vows is celibacy (brahmacarya), which means abstinence from sensory pleasures including sexual pleasures. Despite Jainism's doctrinal acceptance of three genders and three sexual orientations, the end goal of asceticism may not easily align with the concerns of LGBTQ+ people in the contemporary US.

The main reason Jain people inquired into the distinctions between men, women, and the third gender was related to questions of liberation. Jain views on gender and sexuality are related to strict rules for mendicant communities aimed at separating people to avoid sexual temptations. Thus, there is a disconnect with the rhetoric and values found in contemporary LGBTQ+ communities, which may focus on celebrating diverse gender expressions and fostering a positive attitude regarding sexuality. Ultimately, I think that the Jain views on ahimsā and anekāntevāda create a welcoming and friendly environment for LGBTQ+ people, but the equally devout views on brahmacarya and asceticism speak to an overall disconnect between traditional Jain and contemporary LGBTQ+ understandings of the significance of gender and sexuality.

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<sup>25</sup> Jainism: Know It, Understand It & Internalize It, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender—What Is the Jain Thing to Do?"

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