

ARTICLES

Svatantratā (Freedom): A New Perspective on Female Renunciation

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Although women constitute the majority of the Jain ascetic population, gender-based doctrinal interpretations and patriarchal structures within mendicant communities limit women's roles and mobility. This paper explores dynamics regarding gender across both Śvetāmbara and Digambara sects. Through this exploration, we find examples of Jain nuns emerging as figures who subvert systemic subordination while utilizing asceticism as a source of empowerment to initiate change and express agency.

At thirteen years old, and with her father's permission, Kesar joined the mendicant community, gaining education and care from the nuns—a luxury inaccessible to her home life. Per her mother's dying wish, Kesar's father had vowed to uphold Kesar's happiness and well-being under all conditions; yet because Kesar's father worked in the fields during the farming season, Kesar was largely in the custody of his second wife, Bari Devi. Bari Devi resented Kesar, often punishing her without legitimate cause and refusing to feed her. Overwhelmed by the malnourished, frail state of his unrecognizable daughter, Kesar's father immediately sought help from nearby Jain nuns. The nuns healed Kesar, inspiring in her a desire to become one of them—a Jain female mendicant on the path toward dīkṣā.¹ However, not all accounts portray Jain asceticism as a newfound opportunity or a refuge from unhappiness. Gender-based doctrinal interpretations and the patriarchal structure of the saṅgha (monastic community) confine women's roles and mobility, despite women constituting the majority of the Jain ascetic population. To dissect this paradox, this paper demonstrates the individual strength of Jain nuns to subvert systemic subordination within the mendicant community, allowing nuns to utilize the tools of empowerment asceticism can offer to initiate change and gain agency.

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¹ Manisha Sethi, *Escaping the World: Women Renouncers among Jains* (Routledge, 2012), 199.

Background

Jainism is centered on the soul or *jīva*, which remains undying even when the body is discarded. Followers believe that in *saṃsāra* (the cycle of birth and death), passion and mental dispositions cause karma, a kind of matter, to stick and bond to the soul. Mendicants commit themselves to extreme austerities to shed this karmic baggage, and once this is achieved, can reach *mokṣa* (liberation from *saṃsāra*). These actions aim to uphold the following Jain principles: *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence), non-desire, and detachment. Liberation is realized through meticulous practices such as wearing mouth coverings and sweeping the floors to avoid injuring the most microscopic forms of life.² This is accompanied by more extreme forms of bodily mortification, such as pulling out one's hair during initiation, living on alms, and traveling only on foot.³

Jainism consists of two sects: Śvetāmbara and Digambara. Both sects uphold the same foundational principles, allowing women to undertake ascetic practice, but differ on women's liberation and their requirements to complete such a task. The Śvetāmbara sect believes the soul is capable of liberation directly from a female body, while the Digambara tradition upholds the male body as a prerequisite for spiritual release. Ultimately, the Digambara sect believes that the female body is inherently impure, inspiring renunciate women to practice austerities in hopes of being reincarnated as a man in their next life and then liberated. This is complicated, however, by the Digambara constraints on women's participation in their forms of self-mortification, which limits the female scope on possible austerities. While this exclusion may be expected to discourage women from pursuing Jain practice, women overwhelmingly predominate mendicant communities in the Śvetāmbara sect and make up nearly half in the Digambara sect.⁴

Doctrinal Interpretations Justifying Female Subordination

Gender-based doctrinal interpretations constrain women's roles within the *saṅgha*. These interpretations function as a vehicle to justify female subordination and assert women's inadequate physical nature. In response, some nuns have withstood the negativity by taking a stand against these perspectives, challenging the status quo and inspiring other nuns to do the same.

2 Ron Cherry and Hardev S. Sandhu, "Insects in the Religions of India," *American Entomologist* 59, no. 4 (2013): 200.

3 Hermann Jacobi, trans., *The Kalpa Sūtra: Jaina Sūtras, Part I. Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 22 (Clarendon Press, 1884). Excerpted from "Life of Mahāvīra," Chapter 5, 259–262.

4 "Monks and Nuns," Jainpedia, last modified May 27, 2021, <https://jainpedia.org/themes/practices/monksand-nuns/>.

Ascetic Discipline and Female Subordination

The gender-based hierarchy within the mendicant community drives religious practice, upholding the belief that the body must be strictly controlled to achieve desired spiritual attainment. Given that women represent “śakti” or feminine energy, Jain practices employ various methods of control to cool this supposedly “dangerous” heat.⁵ As author and sociologist Manisha Sethi discusses in her ethnographic work, women are constantly observed, given little freedom, and often assigned the lowest-ranked jobs, allowing men to remain the community’s power holders. Sexist scriptural interpretations are one avenue that justify these gender-based practices.⁶ As Robert P. Goldman establishes in his foreword to Padmanabh S. Jaini’s work in *Gender and Salvation*, this idea is evidenced by disagreements over the meaning of the word “women” in specific Jain scripture. For context, Jainism proclaims that one’s feelings may not correspond to their biological gender; a person who is anatomically male can hold female-like feelings. Digambara doctrine holds that where scripture establishes that “women” *are* capable of spiritual liberation, the term actually refers to “a biological male with the sexual orientation of a female . . . a male homosexual.”⁷ By claiming that “women” instead means “male homosexual,” this Digambara scriptural interpretation cements the notion that women are not capable of liberation from the female body, controlling the extent of a female’s spiritual progress.

Religious scriptural interpretations are also used to confine a woman’s status in the afterlife. The Jain universe is organized into three sections: fourteen heavens, one “middle world” where humanity resides, and seven layers of hells; one escapes the universe entirely once liberated.⁸ Women can never fall lower than the sixth hell in the seven hells of the Jain universe, but instead, are constrained within the intermediate levels of the cosmos. This exemption from the lowest hell functions as a “reward” for the difficult householder role laywomen fill in the middle world, such as domestic care and childbearing.⁹ However, Digambara doctrine holds that because women, unlike men, are incapable of experiencing the ultimate death, they are likewise incapable of attaining ultimate liberation.¹⁰ While ostensibly a “reward,” this restriction is actually used as evidence to deny female mokṣa.

5 Anne Vallely, *Guardians of the Transcendent: An Ethnography of a Jain Ascetic Community* (University of Toronto Press, 2002), 229.

6 Robert P. Goldman, foreword to *Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women*, by Padmanabh S. Jaini (University of California Press, 1991), xvii.

7 Goldman, foreword to *Gender and Salvation*, xvii.

8 L. D. Babb, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (University of California Press, 1998), 112.

9 Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 112.

10 Goldman, foreword to *Gender and Salvation*, xvii.

These debates often center on the question of whether the nineteenth Tīrthaṅkara (liberated being) Mallinātha (commonly, Mallinath or Malli) was male, as in Digambara doctrine, or female, as in Śvetāmbara. As Goldman describes:

It is worthy of note in connection with these disputes that the Śvetāmbaras, although they steadfastly argue for the possibility of women entering the mendicant life and attaining nirvāṇa, rarely categorically refute the misogynistic claims of the Digambaras per se. Although they may tend to soften these claims by, for example, pointing out famous women from literature and scripture who showed great spiritual or moral courage, or by asserting that men too may share some of the moral defects charged to women, they seem generally willing to accept the negative characterizations, contenting themselves merely with asserting that these do not in and of themselves preclude the possibility of mokṣa for all women.¹¹

The Śvetāmbaras claim that Malli is the only figure in this epoch to be liberated from the female body, utilizing the story to reinforce the Śvetāmbara notion that nuns can be liberated. However, the Śvetāmbara also support the Digambara interpretation that the story advances the “association between women and sin.”¹² Both sects agree that Prince Mahabal was born male and then reincarnated into a woman, Malli, as a result of moral transgression. Thus, while the sects differ on Malli’s capability for reincarnation—the Digambara claiming Malli must have been reincarnated into a man to be liberated and the Śvetāmbara upholding the possibility for female spiritual release—both groups conclusively correlate female bodies with wrongdoing.

Goldman references stronger language against the female ability for ascetic liberation from Śākaṭyāna, a 9th-century mendicant in the (now extinct) Yāpanīya sect, who argues that women are “lacking the physical, moral, and spiritual courage of men.”¹³ All this shows that across Jain sects, the gender hierarchies imbedded within the mendicant community greatly restrict female spiritual mobility.

Despite these doctrinal positions, the nuns’ strength is identified by their response against these perspectives. In Manisha Sethi’s extensive ethnographic research with Jain nuns in Delhi and Jaipur, she captured a group of nuns that belong to the Shraman Sangh of the Sthanakvasi sect (Śvetāmbara sub-sect), fighting against these claims.¹⁴ Specifically, these women worked

¹¹ Goldman, foreword to *Gender and Salvation*, xvii.

¹² Valley, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 225.

¹³ Goldman, foreword to *Gender and Salvation*, xvii.

¹⁴ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 212.

to oppose the gender-based practice of “vandana vyavahara”—the ascetic practice that “requires effacement of the self and ego; venerating the sadhus, no matter how young or old.”¹⁵ Inspired by their arguments that Mahāvīra claimed superiority to be reflective of one’s spiritual devotion instead of caste or gender, and that his sermons were recorded years after they were stated by men in a patriarchal society—nuns have demanded that the practice should honor one’s seniority and capability, instead of gender as the ascetic focal point.¹⁶ Despite the movement’s limited institutional impact, this unorthodox questioning of the text by nuns has facilitated greater awareness of the gender-based notions pronounced by the mendicant hierarchy. In effect, these actions pave the way for empowerment to be realized as women gain a sense of control over their lives and religious practice. Sethi captures Akshay Sri’s experience, “Even religion may be patriarchal, but at least here in this life of samyama we can ignore this for most times by focusing on our own atma kalyana and learning. We can remain aloof from all this.”¹⁷ In this experience, it is evident that asceticism can be used as a vehicle for change-making and power forming, overcoming the male-directed hierarchy of the community.

Female Anatomy and “Stimulating” Nature

In relation to the notions on nun subordination, doctrinal interpretations also target the female reproductive system and supposed “stimulating” nature. Digambara tradition upholds that the female body is the ultimate site of “himsā” or injury.¹⁸ Produced by bodily fluids and menstrual blood, small, minute forms of life are said to grow between the genital organs and the breasts. These organisms are killed when women engage in intercourse and produce an itch that prevents women from ever ceasing sexual desire.¹⁹ Given the integral role of celibacy and non-violence as critical aspects of Jain renunciation, claims framing the female reproductive system as threatening to the religion affect women’s status and legitimacy as ascetics within the community.

Traditional views additionally express that menstrual blood is *not* involuntary but instead the result of a female’s sexual drive.²⁰ This belief perpetuates the assumption that women lack self-control and independence due to their intense sexual desires, resulting in heightened female vulnerability in the

¹⁵ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 211.

¹⁶ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 212.

¹⁷ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 215.

¹⁸ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 82.

¹⁹ Padmanabh S. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women* (University of California Press, 1991), 13.

²⁰ Jain, *Gender and Salvation*, 13–14.

mendicant community and society at large.²¹ To protect the nuns, they are required to wear white robes and be constantly accompanied by a chaperone. However, this reasoning also comes at the expense of female autonomy. Mari Jyväsjärvi Stuart explains, “...to guard a woman means to defend her from harm and, at the same time, to control her.”²² While both the Śvetāmbara (“white-clad”) and Digambara (“sky-clad”) require women to wear clothing, the difference is that nudity is necessary for liberation in the Digambara tradition, requiring men to be nude but prohibiting women. Simultaneously, renunciation requires detachment from others, but nuns are constantly guarded. The gendered hierarchies that sometimes exist in South Asian society are translated into mendicant life: “the dharmaśāstric triad of father, husband, and son is replaced by another threesome: the male teacher (*āyariya*), the male preceptor (*uvajjhāya*) or head of the monastic group (*gaṇi*), and the female supervisor (*pavattiṇī*, *gaṇiṇī*). . . . if unaccompanied by a man, the Jain nun should also not enter places alone.”²³ In sum, the assumed necessity for female clothing and accompaniment is used to deter liberation from the female body while perpetuating negative notions of the female character.

The provocative nature of the female body is also associated with their supposed temptress-like demeanor. The *Bṛhatkalpabhāṣya* claims that “if one sees their [the nuns’] armpits, private parts, breasts, belly, or thighs, delusion can blaze up even in someone whose senses are subdued: thinking about her, wanting to see her, sighing, fever, burning, lack of appetite, infatuation, going crazy, becoming non-cognizant, dying.”²⁴ Reflecting upon personal experience, the presentation becomes implausible: one cannot *die* from glancing at a woman’s armpits. The question presumes: *Might the problem not be women, but men?* As Valley describes, “It is not uncommon for monks to speak of their ascetic steadfastness in the face of worldly (sexual) temptation in order to demonstrate their spirituality.”²⁵ Comparably, the nuns understand that celibacy is a requirement and not a choice, demonstrating the female commitment to asceticism as a reward itself rather than one granted for following its regulations.²⁶ When culpability is reversed, it becomes evident that the male inability to control their own desires means they need to control women and female liberation at the expense of distorting and fabricating the natural processes of the reproductive system.

21 Mari Jyväsjärvi Stuart, “Male Guardians of Women’s Virtue: A Dharmaśāstric Theme and Its Jain Variations,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 133, no. 1 (2013): 39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7817/jameroriesoci.133.1.0035>.

22 Stuart, “Male Guardians of Women’s Virtue,” 39.

23 Stuart, “Male Guardians of Women’s Virtue,” 44.

24 Stuart, “Male Guardians of Women’s Virtue,” 52.

25 Valley, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 82.

26 Valley, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 84.

Nonetheless, nuns have managed this systemic subordination by continuing their efforts towards their goal of mokṣa—made possible by their perception of female physiology. In Jainism, the basic principles of non-attachment and the worldly soul (jīva) allow women to fully detach from their bodies. This detachment enables women to disregard gender-based scriptural interpretations, as their bodies themselves become insignificant to the practice—allowing women to redirect their efforts towards renunciation.²⁷ In the current epoch, liberation is no longer attainable for female or male Jain ascetics. Hence, Jain nuns recognize that “even though the Digambara values place men above women, given the lack of possibility of moksha in this age, both male and female mendicants are essentially engaged in the same enterprise.”²⁸ This realization allows women to pursue their ascetic goals independently from patriarchal domination or gynophobic remarks. Thus, through vocal resistance, ability to detach from the body, and the idea that women are engaged in the same enterprise as men, women are able to concentrate on renunciation despite gender-biased interpretations.

Male-Dominated Hierarchy in the Saṅgha

As established, some Jain perspectives have pronounced nuns as “inferior” to men—justifying female subordination within the ascetic saṅgha. This section is inspired by the seemingly contradictory nature of Jain renunciation: balancing newfound forms of female agency despite continued marginalization of women in higher status positions and practices.²⁹ To expand this perspective, I argue that it is the nuns’ physical and mental strength, demonstrated by their resistance to traditional hierarchies, that has allowed nuns to construct their own domains of power and positively impact the Jain community.

Challenging the Hierarchy

Domestication within the ascetic saṅgha limits female agency as women are subjected to the same householder positions they had expected to renounce.³⁰ As Sethi describes, examples of this androcentric authority are enacted as women are “pressed into providing for domestic services” for their male counterparts, required to sit on the floor below a man, forbidden from translating the more “intellectual” texts, and appointed to the most rudimentary positions.³¹ Even the most senior female positions are

²⁷ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 209.

²⁸ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 211.

²⁹ Vallety, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 215.

³⁰ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 46.

³¹ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 49.

commanded to follow the jurisdiction of a monk.³² Though these women have renounced householder life and gained extensive credentials to prove their capability, many of their roles resemble the actions of laywomen.

This hierarchy is further pronounced in the multi-stage initiation process, evidenced by the Terāpanthī sect (Śvetāmbara sub-sect), in which extensive training is required for women but not for men. Women (who represent the majority of the ascetic population in this order) spend years becoming samanīs (the semi-nun status) and then sadhvis (nun status), whereas only men with exceptional skills are required to enter an extended initiation process.³³ The men chosen for the extended process are recognized as exceptional, while for women, it is a required step. While an extended initiation offers women opportunities like education and gradual autonomy from their families, this process nonetheless establishes a gender hierarchy—streamlining asceticism for men but delaying the ascetic status for females. The balance of female empowerment and male privilege continues as the nuns’ power and control derived through new opportunities is mitigated by the higher position of men.

As Jaini discusses, women can subvert the monks’ disproportionate concentration of power by filling roles that allow women to produce their own spheres of influence. For instance, nuns can become guides, mentors, and teachers for laywomen—opportunities not available in householder positions.³⁴ These roles empower women by providing them with purpose, particularly by positively impacting the lives of other women who need them.

In addition, women divert male domination by concentrating on their goal of liberation, a common theme of female empowerment. Vandana vyavahara, as noted in the previous section, challenges the nuns’ indifference to ego as they bow down to younger sadhus regardless of seniority, education, or capability. Instead of performing this daily ritual to honor men, Jain nuns complete the practice to dissolve karmic matter. Tapa Gacch Sadhvi Dinmanisri describes a personal account: “I do Vandana to all sadhus with grace and politeness. It never enters my mind that I am a senior so I should not bow to him. Why should I be bothered. . . . I am able to cut at my karma-bandhanas (attachments) by doing vandana and I am happy with that.”³⁵ In the same way that nuns showcase the strength to counter sexist commentary, they too withstand patriarchal authority despite their high qualifications and experience for the ultimate goal of mokṣa. By concentrating solely on spiritual practices rather than institutional politics, female mendicants can dismiss the

³² Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 47.

³³ Vallety, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 101.

³⁴ Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, 26.

³⁵ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 211.

prejudice. Having to prolong initiation or bow down to younger sadhus is outweighed by the nuns' sense of empowerment garnered from their roles as mentors and volunteers, alongside the promise of mokṣa. The strength needed to realize this balancing act creates the foundation for their own spheres of power within the male-dominated hierarchy.

Expressions of Female Power

The patriarchal structure of the ascetic community further functions to control the nuns' everyday routine, devoted to conserving the positive reputation of the saṅgha despite its possible negative effects on the female well-being. Stuart explains, "when the nuns' reputation and virtue are questioned, the reputation and prestige of the entire tradition and its male representatives also come under scrutiny."³⁶ To visualize the scenario, Stuart cites an imagined circumstance from the 6th-century text *Bṛhatkalpabhāṣya*—which advises monks in responding to cases in which a nun might be raped and/or impregnated—recommending that monks should console and protect the nun primarily in efforts to prevent the news from spreading publicly.³⁷ Though just one example, the text seems primarily concerned with monks directing their efforts to obstruct backlash, rather than motivation stemming from the genuine concern to comfort the traumatized nun.

However, the nuns have discovered new methods to express their own power. In response to the attacks by men, Jain nuns use their voice to repel danger. In one instance, a layman who was assigned to accompany the nuns on their journey expressed his loneliness, thereafter, threatening to abduct the younger sadhvis. The nuns responded, "We are five of us. That makes us 10 hands. Beware. Bhikṣu japa protects us. Nothing can happen to us."³⁸ The term "Bhikṣu japa" in this context, demonstrates how the mantras and blessings of the monks provide nuns spiritual protection, in effect "safeguarding" them against harm. While still acknowledging the spiritual prowess of the religious saying, the nuns also understand their own strength and bravery in their decision to use their voice to resist harm. This fuels empowerment as control and power are reinforced into the nun's capabilities.

Reasons for Renunciation

Renunciation is often attributed to motives, such as an escape from impoverishment or a community for widows. While those reasons are viable, ascetic renunciation also offers girls and women an avenue for

³⁶ Stuart, "Male Guardians of Women's Virtue," 46.

³⁷ Stuart, "Male Guardians of Women's Virtue," 46.

³⁸ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 184.

empowerment.³⁹ At the center of this decision lies female agency, developed through their own strength to demand it. Though nuns lead arduous lives that can be dominated by sexist scriptural interpretation, renunciation can be a positive outlet for women, granting them greater autonomy than possible for housewives.⁴⁰

Both marriage and patriarchy are integral to renunciate choice. Traditionally, South Asian women are under the perpetual authority of a male figure. While initially, their fathers served this role in their youth, South Asian women might become subject to the rules of their husbands, children, and in-laws once married, often through a betrothal arrangement. As mothers attending to all householder tasks, Jain laywomen are not granted ample time to indulge in their religious practice—a domain of feelings and emotions they believe comes more easily to them than to men.⁴¹ The term “shaadi-barbaadi” recognizes that marriage is a “state of ruin” which can be equated to a “loss of dignity.”⁴² Instead of surrendering their final fragments of sovereignty, renunciation becomes an extension of the feminine—nuns redirect their devotion from their husbands to renunciate practice.⁴³ Renunciation allows women to seek deeper fulfillment while applying their devotional skills to their ascetic practice.

Yet, dissatisfaction alone in their householder roles cannot make asceticism possible. Instead, it is the nuns’ individual strength that transforms the idea into action—leaving the safety of their home and family for a different path. Sethi reports that women and girls find monastic work, including volunteering and mentoring, more rewarding than their householder role.⁴⁴ In nun roles, women can mentor other women who need them, adopting the role of a leader rather than a follower. This empowers women as they recognize their own ability to contribute to the community and greater society—ideas not always encouraged by a superior monk, but decisions pursued by the nun herself.

Access to higher education is another motivation for renunciation. Education through Jain asceticism offers nuns power and prestige otherwise closed to laywomen in South Asian society.⁴⁵ Many girls in South Asia, especially those like Kesar Devi in rural areas, as discussed in the introduction, are not exposed to an education—reducing opportunities and guaranteeing

³⁹ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 110.

⁴⁰ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 110.

⁴¹ Vally, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 217.

⁴² Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 114.

⁴³ Vally, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 217.

⁴⁴ Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 123.

⁴⁵ Vally, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 100.

householder life becomes their only reality. Through the order, Jain nuns can get a Bachelor of Arts in languages and philosophy, as well as attain a Ph.D. in Jain scripture.⁴⁶ While these achievements still require nuns to navigate the male-dominated obstacles, renunciation nonetheless grants opportunities greater than householder privileges. In this sense, nunnery can pave the way for greater female independence and freedom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, many Jain nuns have demonstrated unparalleled strength to resist sexism in the mendicant community as a means of empowerment, gaining the power to demand greater representation for themselves and their peers. Jainism is defined by uplifting female communities. Through village-based initiation parades, all-female living quarters, and mentorships between saṅgha and lay practitioners, the importance of support is apparent in recognition of one's dream of liberation. It is ultimately the agency of Jain nuns, who actively counter chauvinist dynamics, which offers girls, women, and widows another path. This path is *svatantratā*—freedom. Across all cosmic spheres, Jainism enables nuns to escape the constraints of laywoman roles and family control, and in the end, saṃsāra itself.



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⁴⁶ Valley, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 108.

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