

ARTICLES

Gendered Jain Strategies for Spiritual Advancement

Margaret Gray^{1a}¹ University of California, Santa Barbara

Keywords: gender, Jain laity, spiritual attainment

<https://doi.org/10.12794/journals.suijs.v2i1.327>

*Samyak: An Undergraduate Journal of Jain Studies*Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2026

Whereas Jain laymen turn to the historic exemplars of kings and the gods to learn correct religious behavior, laywomen turn to tales of virtuous wives, mothers, and nuns. As such, laymen largely achieve merit through religious gifting, while laywomen leverage spiritual behaviors such as singing, praying, and fasting. The split between male and female practice gestures to fundamental differences in both the foundation and the orientation of the laity in the Jain faith, where “foundation” refers to the ground of Jain religious practice and “orientation” to the direction of devotional energy. This essay argues that both foundation and orientation vary for Jains along gendered lines.

Ancient Jain narratives continue to inform the lives of Jains today, serving as paradigms for contemporary practice.¹ However, the models that laymen and women appropriate from these narratives differ. Laymen turn to the historic exemplars of the kings and the gods to learn correct religious behavior, while laywomen turn to virtuous wives, mothers, and nuns.² As such, laymen largely achieve merit through religious gifting. Meanwhile, laywomen leverage spiritual behaviors such as singing, praying, fasting, and restricting in order to behave piously. I argue that the split between male and female practice gestures to fundamental differences in both the foundation and the orientation of the laity in the Jain faith.

I will use the terms “foundation” and “orientation” as an analytic frame to identify where various modes of Jain spirituality are rooted, and in which direction they look. These terms should not be considered as reductive simplifications of the Jain religious system. Rather, this dyad is a heuristic by which I hope to illuminate broad and abstract trends in Jain religion. By “foundation” I mean the realm out of which Jain devotion blossoms, the ground of Jain religious practice. By “orientation” I mean the direction where Jains channel their devotional energy. I argue that both foundation and orientation vary for Jains along gendered lines.

a Margaret Gray is a fourth-year student at the University of California, Santa Barbara, majoring in religion, literature, and creative writing. They also study Latin with a classics minor. They will soon begin their Masters degree at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

1 Sherry Fohr, *Jainism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 2.

2 Ibid., 13.

As Anne Vallely argues in her study of Jain women and ascetic ideals, “women’s religiosity is fundamentally deportmental or behavioral, centered on bodily practices, whereas male religiosity is performative, centered on things they do in the public domain.”³ This means that male renunciation represents a break with the world of laymen, while female renunciation occurs as an extreme extension of lay life. I argue that the difference between male renunciatory rupture and female renunciatory continuity can be attributed to different foundations. The mode of laymen’s spiritual advancement is mainly the material exchange of goods and currency, indicating a foundation in the physical world. For laywomen, the exercise of spiritual austerity leads to advancement, revealing a foundation in the spiritual world.

I argue that this difference is strengthened by alternate orientations. Laymen orient their religiosity towards their community through donations. Laywomen are unable to achieve merit outside of the context of their relationships to men. This leads them to center family matters and personal restriction in their religious lives, orienting themselves towards masculine desires (for familial health) and ideals (the suppression of the female body). In what follows, I will examine gendered Jain narratives. I will show that both laywomen and nuns share a spiritual foundation and a masculine orientation, and I will illustrate how laywomen creatively appropriate their altered spiritual status in order to reclaim autonomy in spiritual and material matters alike.

Gendered Divisions in Jain Life

Jain practitioners in India fall into four broad categories: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. The religious community is constituted by this four-fold, which is sometimes represented as the interlocking arms of the *svāstika*.⁴ Differences in gender and renunciation status affect the social and religious script each practitioner must follow. Monks and nuns reject worldly life entirely, hoping to be reborn in a future lifetime as a Jina, or a victor, who has overcome the physical realm of suffering and desire.⁵ Meanwhile laypeople are expected to behave in a moderately pious manner and support the ascetic community with alms. Jainism is a sectarian religion with two large subgroups, the Digambara (sky-clad) and Svetāmbara (white-clad) sects.⁶ In each sect, women are allowed to become ascetics, and do so at high rates.

3 Anne Vallely, “Ambiguous Symbols: Women and the Ascetic Ideal in Jainism,” in *Feminist (Re)visions of the Subject: Landscapes, Ethnoscapes, and Theoryscapes*, ed. Gail Currie and Celia Rothberg (Lexington Books, 2001), 137.

4 Fohr, *Jainism*, 35.

5 Ibid., 4.

6 Ibid., 21–22.

However, there are significant doctrinal differences in each group's treatment of female spirituality. The Digambara sect, who holds that ascetics must give up even their clothing, does not believe it is possible for a soul to achieve enlightenment from a female body, because women are unable to wander naked.⁷ Meanwhile, the Svetāmbara sect postulates that the nineteenth Jina was indeed a woman. Perhaps due to this distinction, there are more Svetāmbara than Digambara nuns.

Though this gendered division may seem relevant to the daily treatment of laywomen in each sect, Sherry Fohr, in her book, *Jainism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, emphasizes that the Jinas do not serve as genuine role models for laypeople. According to the argument that structures her book, Jinas serve as narrative exemplars for renunciants, while laywomen look to narratives about virtuous women, or *satī* narratives, and laymen look to kings and gods.⁸ Illustrating the separation between Jinas and the laity, Whitney Kelting, in her book *Singing to the Jinas*, notes that many Svetāmbara laywomen consider the enlightenment of the nineteenth Jina the rare exception which proves the rule of male spiritual superiority.⁹ This means that while there are abstract doctrinal disputes about the spiritual potency of women within the Jain faith, lay Jains do not feel the effects of the arguments as keenly in their regular practice as one might imagine.

Lay Female Exemplars

Fohr identifies alternate examples of religious models after excluding the Jinas. She observes *satī* narratives operating as the templates for laywomen's spirituality. The *satī* narrative centers on extreme chastity, equating sexual control with moral perfection. However, these positive narratives are accompanied by other, misogynistic cultural understandings of women as hypersexual and predatory seductresses.¹⁰ In many ways, writes Valley, both the ideal of the pious woman and the seductress "hold the same negative understanding of a female nature as flawed, associated with sexuality and sin."¹¹ The *satī* is considered extremely pious because her own nature is rendered utterly corrupt; her power lies in her ability to curb her unbridled sensuality. In this way, the *satī's* chastity indicates her masculine orientation, the quelling of her problematic femininity so that it does not pose a threat to male spiritual progression.

⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ Whitney Kelting, *Singing to the Jinas: Jain Laywomen, Maṇḍal Singing, and the Negotiations of Jain Devotion* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 44.

¹⁰ Ibid., 42.

¹¹ Valley, "Ambiguous Symbols," 133.

Meanwhile, the additional model of the Jina's human mother, identified by Kelting in *Singing to the Jinas*, reveals the female Jain's investment in family life. "Though the Jina will someday become a mendicant and leave the home," writes Kelting, "the devotional narratives center around the celebration of the conception, pregnancy, birth, and up-bringing of an extraordinary son."¹² Women have access to greatness, but, as Manisha Sethi writes, "their greatness may derive not necessarily in seeking salvation for their own selves, but in acting as spiritual guides for their sons."¹³ Unlike men, whose spirituality orients towards the public,¹⁴ women's religious success finds its basis in the success of her sons and husbands.

A common thread emerges in the consideration of each of these Jain role models. The *sati* must remain chaste so as not to tempt the men around her, suppressing the sexuality considered inherent to her body. The Jina's mother becomes pious because of her exemplary capability as a parent to her son. In both cases, the religious woman accesses achievement through her consideration of and relationship to the men surrounding her.

Renunciant Exemplars

Even in the case of the female renunciant, religious behavior is directed towards men. Sethi writes that although the original Jain scriptures advertised sexual egalitarianism, eventually the faith "developed a panoply of additionally stringent rules for female mendicants. These were geared towards maintaining a strict control over the nuns' conduct, especially their sexual conduct."¹⁵ While asceticism is gender-neutral in theory, anxiety about the female body, encoded with excessive desire, means that norms for male and female ascetics invariably differ.

Additional issues are posed to the female ascetic in consideration of the foundation of her religiosity. Because as a woman, she has always religiously operated in the spiritual realm, obtaining merit by engaging in pseudo-nun behaviors, the mode of her religious engagement does not change. For a male ascetic, the transition from the material world of lay devotion to the spiritual one of monkhood is marked; for a woman, who operates outside of the worldly realm both before and after she renounces, her ascetic life "is less a renunciation than an extension of what came before."¹⁶ According to this scheme, the female decision to renounce is not truly a rejection of the world, as she cannot religiously employ the physical realm even as a layperson.

¹² Kelting, *Singing to the Jinas*, 44.

¹³ Manisha Sethi, "Chastity and Desire: Representing Women in Jainism," *South Asian History and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2009), 48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472490903387209>.

¹⁴ Vally, "Ambiguous Symbols," 137.

¹⁵ Sethi, *Chastity and Desire*, 52.

¹⁶ Vally, "Ambiguous Symbols," 134.

Instead, writes Vallety, “female asceticism... represents a renunciation of *stridharma* (gender duty), which emphasizes *sewa* (service) to, and sacrifice for, *others*. Religious practices are no longer observed for the welfare of family or to demonstrate sexual purity; they are for their own liberation.”¹⁷ Nuns have access to the recalibration of their sacrifice, but laywomen can only reap the fruit of their labor when they do so for the benefit of their male family members.

Laywomen and nuns alike, then, find their exemplars in pious women, and construct their virtue based on norms of restriction and self-control which consistently reveal inscriptions of male-oriented religiosity. Laymen, on the other hand, demonstrate religion “through ‘performances’ in the public domain. They are not centered on bodily management or behavioral practices as they are with women.”¹⁸ This difference marks the character of male and female lay practice, and although it is predicated on a distaste for the female body, it allows women creative power in a number of ways. As I will illustrate below, Jain laywomen capitalize on the slippage between renunciatory and lay lifestyles, leveraging their liminality to increase their material prospects, and drawing upon spiritual power in a way inaccessible to laymen.

Expressions of Women’s Empowerment

Young Jain women, preparing for marriage, utilize their proximity to the spiritual realm. Many participate in the Updhān fast, utilizing what Kelting calls “strategic piety”¹⁹ in order to increase their marriage prospects. During the Updhān fast, young women at the cusp of adulthood consider the life of a nun, or, as Kelting argues, *perform* this consideration. The young woman’s performance is calibrated to encourage suitors or turn the odds of marriage negotiation in her favor. Thus, the feminine position, teetering on the edge of the worldly and spiritual realms within the religious act, allows her worldly autonomy. In fact, the autonomy she secures extends beyond her material circumstances, and allows her a deeper freedom; “during the years while a young woman’s body is being inscribed as wifely, these same young women destabilize that identity through the embodied adoption of ritual practices which invoke the discourse of nun-hood,”²⁰ writes Kelting, gesturing to a bid for existential autonomy.

Deceased Jain women also benefit from the altered rhetoric surrounding female piety after death. As Kelting notes, through participation in *satī* discourse, even young Jain women who pass away before they had the

¹⁷ Ibid., 143.

¹⁸ Ibid., 137.

¹⁹ Whitney Kelting, “Leveraging Agency: Young Jain Women’s Ritual Innovations through the Updhān Fast,” in *Ritual Innovation: Strategic Interventions in South Asian Religion*, ed. Brian K. Pennington and Amy L. Allocco (State University of New York Press, 2018), 191.

²⁰ Kelting, “Leveraging Agency,” 195.

opportunity to legitimize themselves as powerful wives or mothers are able to access a sense of virtue. While they may not have the chance to succeed in the worldly sphere, they can be described as spiritually successful. Meanwhile, “young men who cannot participate in the greatness of the great layman patron are left with no way of articulating their virtue.”²¹ In these cases, Kelting writes, Jain biographers fill the space of the young man’s elegy with abstract musings about mortality.²²

Additionally, Jain women’s increased access to spiritual realms dissolves some of the strict boundaries between Jain lay and monastic practice. While the locus of practice is different in the case of Jain men, with laymen dedicating themselves to the material world in order to procure goods for religious gifting, and monks dedicating themselves to the renunciation of material, Jain laywomen and nuns share in the site of their spiritual prerogative. This shared religious core allows for a flux between monastic austerities and daily devotions. The flux forms a rift which allows some of the spiritual power of the renouncer to ‘bleed’ into the daily life of the Jain laywoman, allowing her increased power within her community.²³

While a laywoman typically cannot secure power in traditionally masculine ways, she can exert spiritual muscles to gain worldly prizes, even controlling the flow of wealth or the health of her family.²⁴ In exchange for her loss of a sense of religious self separate from her husband, or, in the case of an unmarried Jain woman, her male community members, the Jain laywoman gains a supernatural power over the well being of the family, achieving metaphysical security while her husband performs the role of the worldly ‘breadwinner.’²⁵

Fohr’s delineation between male and female exemplars for laypeople in the Jain faith allows for a deeper understanding of the foundations of each gendered mode of spiritual advancement, the considerations which orient the religious practitioner, and the ways that women work within the (sometimes misogynist) system in order to increase their power in the transcendent and immanent realms alike. By tracing their movements throughout the religious realm, normally reserved for renunciants, the creative subversion of Jain laywomen comes to light.

21 Whitney Kelting, “Good Wives, Family Protectors: Writing Jain Laywomen’s Memorials,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2003), 638, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1466497>.

22 Ibid., 651.

23 Kelting, “Leveraging Agency,” 191.

24 Kelting, “Good Wives,” 644, and Kelting, *Singing to the Jinās*, 46.

25 Kelting, *Singing to the Jinās*, 47.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-NC-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0> and legal code at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

REFERENCES

- Fohr, Sherry. *Jainism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- Kelting, Whitney. "Good Wives, Family Protectors: Writing Jain Laywomen's Memorials." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2003): 637–57. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1466497>.
- Kelting, Whitney. "Leveraging Agency: Young Jain Women's Ritual Innovations through the Updhān Fast." In *Ritual Innovation: Strategic Interventions in South Asian Religion*, edited by Brian K. Pennington and Amy L. Allocco. State University of New York Press, 2018.
- Kelting, Whitney. *Singing to the Jinas: Jain Laywomen, Maṇḍal Singing, and the Negotiations of Jain Devotion*. Oxford University Press, 2001. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195140117.001.0001>.
- Sethi, Manisha. "Chastity and Desire: Representing Women in Jainism." *South Asian History and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2009): 42–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472490903387209>.
- Vallely, Anne. "Ambiguous Symbols: Women and the Ascetic Ideal in Jainism." In *Feminist (Re)visions of the Subject: Landscapes, Ethnoscapes, and Theoryscapes*, edited by Gail Currie and Celia Rothberg. Lexington Books, 2001.