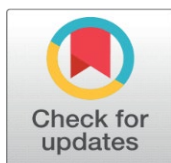


WOMEN IN JAINISM: ASCETICS AND PATRONS IN EPIGRAPHIC AND VISUAL TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of women as ascetics and donors in Jain tradition, drawing upon inscriptions and their visual articulation in sculpture. It seeks to illuminate the paradox of women's marginal textual voice yet prominent numerical and social presence within the Jain community. Although canonical texts, largely authored by monks, often portray the female body as inferior and a hindrance to spiritual progress, historical evidence consistently reveals that the number of *sādhvīs/āryikās* has surpassed that of monks. This distinctive feature of Jainism underscores the tension between textual silence and lived reality.

By analyzing inscriptions, the study highlights women's active participation in religious life—not only as ascetics but also as independent donors whose contributions shaped the material and spiritual landscape of Jain communities. Their presence in records of donations and household systems demonstrates a recognized social agency, even within the patriarchal framework of Brahmanical norms. Sculptural depictions further reinforce their visibility, offering a counterpoint to textual marginalization.

Through this dual lens of inscriptional and visual sources, the article argues that Jainism's approach to women was comparatively more inclusive than that of other contemporary traditions, while still constrained by prevailing social structures. The research thus contributes to understanding how women negotiated space within ascetic and donor roles, revealing the complex interplay between ideology, practice, and representation in Jain tradition.

Keywords: Women In Jainism, Jain Asceticism, Epigraphic Evidence, Donor Patronage, Jain Art and Iconography

1. INTRODUCTION

Jainism since its inception has followed to the *fourfold sangha* which led to the inclusion of women not only as lay community but also in ascetic community.¹ Most of the texts have been written by monks and inclined to male perspective. Body has been the marker of justification for their deeds in the past and karmanic influx leads to the new life.² Feminine form has been depicted inferior and as a hurdle in the

¹ Fourfold Sangha comprises Monk and Nuns, laymen and laywomen.

² Jainendra Siddhānta Kośa Part 2, Bhārtiya Jñānapīṭha Publication, 1971. pp 25-30; Also See also par IV, pp. 4-6

spiritual path of a monk.³ The voice of the female is not heard within the text and the women body is depicted inferior. But the number of the Sādhvī/Āryikā is always shown greater than the monk in Jain sangha in the canonical literature and even the recent studies also reveal that the number of the Sādhvī/Āryikā is far more than the monk.⁴ It is a distinguishing feature of Jainism. Balbir considers impossibility of widow remarriage as a main factor for high number of Sādhvī/Āryikā.⁵ But her view cannot be supported in the absence of the data of widowed and unmarried women.

Are the same rules implemented on the Ācārya/Muni/Sādhu and Sādhvī/Āryikā or is there more restriction on the Sādhvī/Āryikā? In response of these question Sūtra literature clearly reveal restriction on her and most of them are because of her female body. The ballad Āyār mentions that Karman influx by sensual perception and activity and the woman as its mediator.⁶ As per Sūtra literature there is much more restriction on the Sādhvī/Āryikā than the Ācārya/Muni/Sādhu⁷ and most of them are based on their feminine body.

In the spiritual path though they rarely or almost not have achieved the title equal to Ācārya/Muni/Sādhu. In comparison of the Ācārya/Muni/Sādhu the number of Sādhvī/Āryikā is always higher but the contribution of Sādhvī/Āryikā as writer of the manuscript is very less in the comparison to Ācārya/Muni/Sādhu.⁸ The debate of the gender of Mallinātha divides the views of the scholars even within the same sect. The representation of Mallinātha in the sculpture also vary from the sectarian view. The role of woman as mother, wife and daughter is admired if followed as per the text's normativity.

Except fundamental values, we can see that the institutional rules with time and demand keep changing and accept and rejects some of the canonical rules.⁹ Jaini has pointed out that in spite of common doctrine and much common religious behavior Śvetāmbar and Digambar have different scriptures and even there is no prevention to the rise of subsects in Jainism.¹⁰ In comparison to the older sects newly emerged sects like Terāpantha has given more space to a female to be the head of the female unit though she is not equal to the Ācāryā.

In this paper, I have been trying to look at the inscription and visual representation of woman in Jaina tradition. I have analyzed inscription from Rajasthan, Madhyapradesh and Gujarat of the precolonial India. While analyzing the inscription we can see that most of the inscription represents them as wife, daughter, mother, widow or satī and some of them mention as Sādhavi. In comparison to other religion the presence of woman in the inscription is very much higher. Their identity is not invincible but is certainly woven within the patriarchal framework.

³ Bhagwatī Ārādhana, Jain Sanskriti Sanrakshak Sangh, Sholapur, 1978.

⁴ Peter Flugel (ed), Studies in Jaina History and Culture: Disputes and Dialogue, Routledge, 2006.

⁵ Nalini Balbir, Women in Jainism, p 125; Also see Padmnabh Jaini, Gender and Salvation: Jain Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women, University of California, 1991. p 25.

⁶ Walther Schrbing, The Doctrine of the Jainas: Described after the old Sources, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1978, p. 34

⁷ Nalini Balbir, *Women in Jainism*, p 122.

⁸ Haribhadrasūri considered Yākinī Mahattarā as his spiritual mother.

⁹ Paul Dunda, The Jain, Routledge, 2002.

¹⁰ See P Jaini, opcit.

2. WOMEN AS ASCETIC

The question of whether a woman can attain salvation has long been a subject of debate among scholars, with differing viewpoints expressed across traditions.¹¹ There are several examples in which women are described as achieving salvation—for instance, Subhadda, who is said to attain liberation in a future birth after the complete decay of all karmas. Numerous accounts also highlight women making donations with the explicit aim of attaining salvation.

The debate surrounding the nineteenth Tirthankara, Mallinātha, extends beyond the issue of female salvation. It also concerns the possibility of a woman attaining the highest spiritual status as a Tirthankara. Bhāvasena, drawing on the absence of feminine features in Mallinātha's images and the consistent depiction of the Tirthankara in masculine form, argues against the identification of Mallinātha as female.¹²

Figure 1

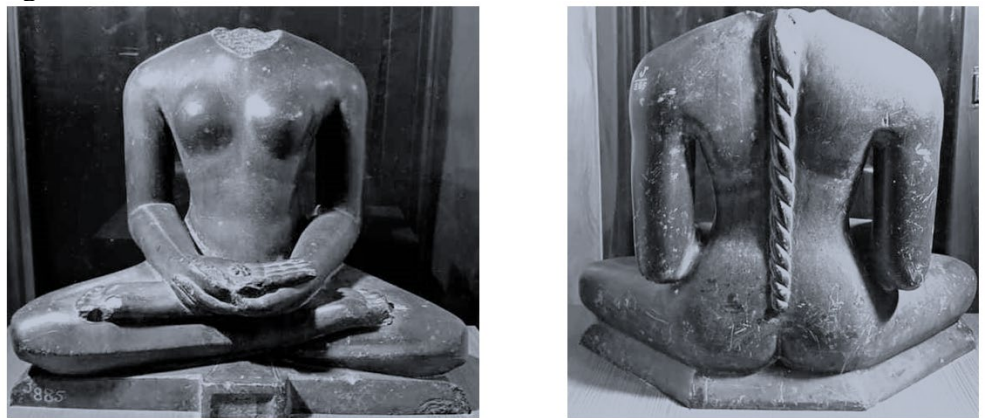


Figure 1 Mallinātha, one of the 24 Tirthankar Depicted with Feminine Body

Balbir while criticizing the view of Bhāvasena over the absence of femineity and points out that the depiction of the sexual characteristic is not of much importance as the image is a material aids for meditation and reflects to the emancipated souls and not to the physical feature.¹³ But to agree with the view of Balbir is reducing to the search of the woman's identity. If it is just a reflection of the emancipated soul then why all the tirthankara have not been represented as female. The attempt to depict her in a male body also reveal her position as not acceptable by the larger section of the patriarchal society.

But against Bhavasena's view, the recent finding of Mallinātha's depiction in the early medieval India with her feminine identity reveal that her female identity always has been a trouble for a larger section to see a woman at the highest position. The above image of Mallinātha from Luchnow museum reveal her sexuality with embossed breast and long hair. Another image of her can be seen in the temple of Palitana, Gujarat.

¹¹ P Jaini, opcit.

¹² Bhāvasena is a Digambar writer of fourteenth century. For detail see Bhāvasena's Muktivicāra.

¹³ Balbir, p 137

3. WOMAN AS PATRON

Women have played an important role within the household in Indian subcontinent. In the Jainism, they have been given more freedom in terms of leading to the spiritual path. They have been allowed to opt for renunciation and also to be an active patron in installing the images of tirthankara or building the temple. Canonical literature strictly adheres to the loyalty of a woman to her husband. Infidelity both physically and mentally is admired and the one who dedicates her life in the growth of her partner is considered reason of wealth. But in the counterpart a male can get married to more than a woman but a female is not allowed to indulge except with him. This is the characteristic of the early Indian society irrespective of religious practices. In the inscriptions woman's identity is attached to the male and have been identified as wife/daughter/mother. In the Jain community, the unity of family members is regarded with great importance, and inscriptions often reflect this inclusivity by acknowledging each shareholder. Notably, many inscriptions record the names of wives, underscoring their recognized place within the family and community structure.

We have ample evidence of donation by Jaina laity at various places. These donations belong either donation of idol or constructing a temple or well. Chait Tritīrthī image inscription of Saṃvat 1191 mentions about the installation of an image by Laṣe and his wife Salaṣā¹⁴. Pārśvanātha metal image inscription of saṃvat 1403 records the installation of the image of Pārśvanātha by Bhavanakīrtī and his wife Trapo and their son Pāla pay obeisance to Pārśvanātha.¹⁵ Pārśvanātha metal image inscription of saṃvat 1403 records the installation of the image by Sṃghavi Jaalandhara and his wife Jaṇasapa and their son Vije. Caubīsī Pancāyati temple inscription of 14th century and 15th century inscription records donation by wives.¹⁶ Chaubīsī Pancāyati temple inscription records that cāndvāḍa with his wife Bharwata with some other mentioned person built something in Pancāyati temple.¹⁷ Sāmvalji Jain temple inscription records the name of Ajmerā gotra family person with their wife who contributed in construction of the Siddhacakra and pay their homage to it.¹⁸ Jhunjanū Jain temple inscription records the construction of the image of Ādinātha by Samadharena and his wife Padmiṇī with other family member.¹⁹ Pārśvanātha temple Jhunjanū inscription records the obeisance by Dhālī with her husband (name broken), Bāhaḍahī with her husband Gadrā.²⁰ 17th century inscription from Jaipur records the making of the icons of Jain deities at Amber and Hastināpur by Aggarwal family members e.g. Panota and her husband Narendra, Parimalā and her husband Keśode, Sahodarā wife of Nandarāma, Bhagwatī with her husband Dayāsī, Nīramalā wife of Jagasingh, Janakavari wife of Harī Singh.²¹

¹⁴ A.K.Singh, & N.K. Jain, Inscriptions of Gwalior: Material for the History of Gopādrī Region Volume -I, B.R.Publishing Corporation, 2016. Pp 94-95

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 131

¹⁶ Ratanlal Mishra, Inscriptions of Rajasthan vol. 3, Himanshu Publication, 2006. pp 152-53

¹⁷ Ibid., P 152

¹⁸ Ibid., P 25

¹⁹ Ibid., P 111

²⁰ Ibid., P 109

²¹ Ibid., p. 35

Figure 2



Figure 2

In many inscription we do find more than the one wife of Jain devotee, following are the examples : Suvidhinātha metal image inscription of Saṃvat 1496 records the dedication of the image of Suvidhinātha by Śāṇī, Thutau and Sālagagadā, wives of śreṣṭhi Mākā of Śrīmāla jāti at the inspiration of śrī Munisimha Sūri and under the direction of śrī Śilaratna Sūri.²² Another example of the polygamy can be seen from Neminātha image inscription of Saṃvat 1505 which records the installation of the image by *sādhu* mahipāla and his wives Cuṃdo and Saputā.²³ Pārśvanātha Jaina temple inscription v.s 1658 records three wives of Dālu.²⁴ Sanghī Mohandāsa temple Amer inscription also records more than one wife e.g Mahimāde and Lhoḍī wife of Śrīmāla; Āśakaraṇa had five wife; Khetasī had two wife; Mohandāsa had two wife; Thānasingh also had two wife named Sujānade and Lādī.²⁵ In this inscription virtues of a good woman are mentioned e.g. *Manasukha dārā mā ca putriṇī bahurupiṇī. Pativratāsuśīlāyā bālāti bhuvane vare.* Rewasa inscription v.s. 1661 records the installation of Padmaśilā in the temple of Ādinātha by Kuntā and his wife Kuntasirā, Jitā and his two wives Jayasamade and Harsamade, Nathamal and his two wives *Sādhvī* Norangade and *Sādhvī* Lādamade.²⁶

Jain temple Inscription from Bairātha v.s 1644 records the installation of three icons of Pārśvanātha in stone, Candraprabhā in copper and Rṣabhadeva. The statue of Vimalanātha was consecrated along the three icons. In this inscription much praise is showered on Akbar in whose reign the temple was built. He is compared to lord Rāmachandra and Yudhiṣṭhira. It also records that due to the Jain influence The Mughal emperor proclaimed the observation of complete ban on animal slaughter for 106 days in a year. It also mentions about the two wives of Indrarāja named Jayavantī and Nagīnā.²⁷ The temple was also known as Indra Vihāra. We also find that even when a son makes a donation, his mother's name is included alongside his father's. For example, the Caturviṃśati metal image inscription of Saṃvat 1343

²² A.K.Singh,& N.K Jain, N.K (2016) opcit. p 155

²³Ibid., pp 172

²⁴ Ratanlal Mishra, opcit. pp 29-30

²⁵ Ibid., pp 30-31

²⁶ Ibid., P 113

²⁷ Ibid., P 25

records the obeisance of Narapati, son of Śrī Śubhakīrti and his wife Jadu.²⁸ This highlights the significance of women in the Jaina tradition: they have always been acknowledged, though primarily within the framework of the household system. In the following sculptor from Dilwara Jain temple, a male with his multiple wives have been depicted. It shows the social acceptance of polygamy at the time, and also illustrating the active participation of female in the social and communal life.

Figure 3



Figure 3

²⁸ A.K Singh & N K Jain, (2016) opcit. pp 126
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4. DONATION BY ONLY WOMAN DONOR

There is clear evidence of women acting as individual donors. However, inscriptions typically identify them in relation to family or religious roles—most often as wives, daughters, or as Sādhvīs/Āryikās. The following inscriptions serve as examples of women recognized as independent donors.:

Pañcatīrthī image inscription of Saṃvat 1190 records the donation by Viīṭikayā daughter of Devama.²⁹Ādinātha metal image inscription of Saṃvat 1507 records the dedication of the image by Kapūrade wife of Bhoṇasī. Kapūrade dedicated this image to the virtues of her brother namely Bhaṇṇati.³⁰Ajītanātha metal image inscription records the installation of the image of Ajītanātha by lady Devalde with his family members under the direction of śrī jinasāgara Sūri. Chitor pillar inscription mention that Jayataldevi queen of Maharana Tejsingh built Śyāma Pārśvanātha temple.³¹Acalagarh inscription 1458 AD records the construction of 108 *mana* weight image of tirthankara by Bholi hosi wife of Dungar Singh.³²Pañcatīrthī image inscription of Saṃvat 1187 refers to the installation of the image by Luṇavati.³³ Inscription on the image of brass in the Jhālerwāla nasiā records that the icon was made by the daughter of Khetal.³⁴

5. RAJUL MĀTĀ AND PISAṆAHĀRI KĪ MAḌHIYĀ

A devoted woman who abstains from physical pleasures after the death or renunciation of her husband is accorded a higher status in society. There are numerous examples in which such women are revered, and their devotion is given special recognition within the Jain tradition. One notable case is that of Rajul Mātā, who was betrothed to Neminātha. Following Neminātha's renunciation, she dedicated her entire life to meditation. Her unwavering devotion has earned her great respect within the Jain community.

Pisanhārī Maḍhiyā, a renowned temple in Jabalpur, serves as a symbolic testament to the life and devotion of a woman. It conveys the message that true dedication must be directed toward the Tirthankaras, and further emphasizes that a chaste woman, through her determination and faith, can accomplish anything she aspires to.

²⁹ Ibid., p 94. In the translation of the inscription Sutyā has been wrongly translated as son.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 174

³¹ Ratanlal Mishra, *Inscription of Mewar*, B R Publication, 2006, pp 132-33

³² Ibid., pp 152.

³³ A.K Singh & N K Jain, (2016) *opcit.* Pp. 94.

³⁴ Ratanlal Mishra,, *Inscriptions of Rajasthan vol. 3*, Himanshu Publication, 2006. P 25

Figure 4



Figure 4 Pisanahārī Madhiyā, Jabalpur, MP

6. CONCLUSION

Jainism’s approach toward women appears comparatively more liberal than that of other contemporary religions. The frequent mention of women in inscriptions reveals that they had a stronger voice and a recognized place within the household system. Moreover, records of donations made by women as individuals demonstrate that they held their own position in society. However, given that Jainism emerged within a patriarchal context—where everyday interactions were shaped by prevailing social norms and institutions were largely led by monks—women’s voices were acknowledged primarily within the framework of the existing Brahmanical social structure.