Chapter II. Theorizing Renunciation: Possibilities and Limitations

To what extent do sociological theories of renunciation aid us in understanding the surfeit of women in the Jain renouncer population? Over the years, beginning from Dumont's influential essay, "World Renunciation in Indian Religions"¹, the institution and practice of renunciation has received sustained scholarly attention. There have emerged critiques of Dumont's excessive focus on textual and Brahmanical prescriptions at the cost of, argue his many critics, the view from the field and non-Brahmin groups; rich ethnographies of communities of ascetics, and even some excellent works on female ascetics is now available. What can we learn from these ethnographies and theoretical perspectives to advance our analysis of Jain nuns and the principle question of this thesis: how to explain the large numbers of Jain female ascetics?

Below we survey the field of sociological perspectives on renunciation and assess their utility to our theme.

Surveying the Field: Dumont's Individual 'outside' the World and 'inside' the World

Dumont was the first to provide a theoretical thrust to the studies on renunciation and continues to cast a hegemonic spell over current scholarship. In investigating the presence of renouncers in relation to caste society, the Dumontian structuralist schema achieved a series of splits at various related levels—between individualism

and holism, between renouncer and householder, between caste and sect, between purity and pollution. He premised caste—an all-encompassing system of ideas and values underlined by the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution—as the fundamental institution of Hindu society. The world of caste, according to Dumont, was a world of relations, which does not recognize individuals. Such a society, unlike the western one, Dumont believed, suppressed the emergence of individualism. However, “a stream of Hindu thought also admits the possibility of individual as being. [Emphasis mine]. This is the world of renunciation and salvation premised upon the concepts of samsara and karma”. It is therefore only in the practice of renunciation—“a social state apart from society proper”—that the functional interdependence of caste may be contradicted and escaped from. “The renouncer leaves the world behind in order to consecrate himself to his own liberation. He submits himself to his chosen master, or he may even enter a monastic community, but essentially he depends upon no one but himself, he is alone.”

The opposition between the world and the institution of renunciation is further elaborated by Dumont through recourse to ashrama theory and the Dharmashastric values. Firstly, by limiting renunciation to the last stage of a man’s life, when all worldly obligations have been dispensed with, ashrama theory tempers the intervention of this institution in “its relation to worldly conditions” and displays a decided, though “subdued hostility to renunciation”. And secondly, while the

---

2 ibid., p. 42.  
3 ibid., p. 43.  
4 ibid., p. 44.  
5 ibid., p. 47.  
6 ibid., p. 45.  
7 ibid., p. 45.
Dharmashastras prescribe three necessary and legitimate worldly ends of life: dharma, artha and kama; the pursuit of the supreme end of moksha or negation of the mundane world, corrodes the first three.\(^8\)

In renouncing the array of roles assigned to him by his social group, the renouncer acquires a distinctive ability to think as an individual that opposes him to the man-in-the-world and brings him closer to the western thinker.\(^9\) The difference being that while the western thinker is an individual within the society, the Hindu renouncer is individuated outside the society, that is, he is man-outside-the-world. Thus an opposition is conceived, first between the holism of caste society and the individualism of the Occident, and then between the man-in-the-world, the householder and the individual-outside-the-world, the renouncer. Dumont comes to locate the renouncer outside the world of social relations and regulations.

Dumont's Critics:

Dumont's thesis of renouncer's 'otherworldliness' has been critiqued on grounds that it is not so much a theory about renouncers as much as "an observation about Brahmanical theorizing"\(^10\). According to Richard Burghart, the relationship between renouncer and householder is too complex to be subsumed under a simple opposition: it ranges from distinctions characterized by "negation, interiorisation,

---

\(^8\) Dumont further adds that though the man-in-the-world may occasionally adopt the notions that belong intrinsically to a renouncer, their conditions and thoughts remain of a different kind. Thus he is hinting that the religion of the laity is essentially different from that of the renouncers. However there is no contradiction between the two, as the renouncer does not deny the religion of the man-in-the-world. "[Being] an individual religion based upon choice [it] is added to the religion of the group." ibid., p.45.

\(^9\) ibid., p. 46.

encompassment, sequence”.\(^{11}\) The range of these distinctions is made clear by Burghart’s comprehensive critique of Dumont’s conceptualization of renunciation. By ignoring ethnographic data on renouncers, charges Burghart, Dumont’s views were based entirely on the Brahmin householder’s view of renunciation—but since the renouncer and householder inhabit different conceptual universes, Dumont’s theory was inevitably “partial”. The opposition between the householder and the renouncer is premised on the \textit{ashrama} or the life-stages theory, which, “is a ritual model of the universe cast in terms of social categories” and “not a sociological model cast in terms of universal categories”.\(^{12}\) Not only then is this model tainted by the biases of those who compiled and perpetuated it, it also excluded non-Brahmanical religions such as Jainism and Buddhism. On his part though, Dumont was convinced that Buddhist and Jain religions could be as well explained through the category of the renouncer he had delineated.\(^{13}\)

In contrast to Dumont’s contention, Burghart proposes that the ascetic does not stand outside the social universe but rather the social universe—“the entire caste and life stage organism of society”\(^{14}\)—comes to stand inside him. Burghart illustrates this relation of encompassment with reference to the Brahmanical doctrine of three debts:

- The debt to the sages (\textit{rishi-rina}), which is redeemed by the acquisition of knowledge in the Vedas.

\(^{11}\) ibid., p. 649.
\(^{12}\) ibid., p. 637.
\(^{13}\) Dumont, “World Renunciation in Indian Religions,” \textit{op. cit.}, p. 36.
• The debt to the ancestors (*pitra-rina*), which is discharged by marriage and bearing sons.

• The debt to the gods (*deva-rina*), which is redeemed by maintaining the sacrificial fire within the home.\(^{15}\)

The Brahmanical codes of conduct require the acolyte to dispense with his three debts before embarking on the path of renunciation. However, even in his renunciant life, he does not stop repaying these debts; only he “interiorises” the means by which this is achieved. One need only quote Burghart’s lucid prose here:

> Instead of sending his semen downward to beget sons who will secure his safe passage and immortality of their parents in the ancestral world, the ascetic stores up his seeds, controls his senses, and practices austerities in order to burn away the sins of many lifetimes and thereby attain immortality. Instead of studying the Vedas, the ascetic by virtue of his reunion with Brahma is said to become a living manifestation of the Vedas. Instead of offering sacrifices to the gods, the ascetic gives away his property as a sacrificial fee and reposes the sacrificial fire within himself ... so that his entire body becomes a sacrifice to the soul. ... By virtue of his renunciation ... the entire social universe in its unmanifested and pre-manifested state stands inside him. The ascetic is Brahma.\(^{16}\)

As an embodiment of the social world, the performer of the interior sacrifices, the ascetic approximates the Brahma and thus stands in a position superior to the ‘twice-

\(^{15}\) *ibid.*, pp. 638-9.

\(^{16}\) *ibid.*, p. 639.
born' householder, performer of the exterior sacrifices. The relation between the
alms-giving householder and the alms-receiving ascetic is also unlike the typical
supporter-supported relationship which celebrates the superiority of the one who
supports or donates. Here the recipient by virtue of receiving only useless food and
clothing from the householder divests himself of any material attachments and
imbues the gift with a sacred purpose, and thus establishes his pre-eminence. 17

If in place of according primacy to the Brahmin's view as Dumont does, one were to
supplant the ascetic's view as Burghart does, a whole new field of engagement and
discourse begins to emerge: this is the arena of inter-sectarian relationships,
engagements and rivalries. For Burghart, the relationship between the ascetics hailing
from different sects is more important than that between the householder and the
ascetic, indeed even the most important relationship. Buddha's first audience upon
attaining enlightenment, Burghart is quick to remind us, did not comprise
householders but a group of rival ascetics.

The foundation and institutionalization of militant orders and victory processions
among ascetics in the 17th and 18th centuries can be traced to inter-sectarian rivalries
between Muslim Fakirs, Shaivite Sanyasis and Vaishnavite Bairagis. Indeed these
inter-sectarian rivalries are of central significance in a sect's formation, perpetuation
and self-identity. 18 Peter van der Veer's study of the Ramanandi monastic order in
Ayodhya has foregrounded monks as primarily political actors, who articulate,
underplay, or emphasize their identities.\(^{19}\) Dismissing the claim that religious experiences can be comprehended by a simple resort to the sacred tenets of Hinduism, van der Veer advocates the study of behaviour over values. What van der Veer offers us is an interpretative description of the way religious specialists—both monks and priests—live, and the institutions that bind them together. Here political processes are not relegated to the domain of epiphenomena but are shown to be crucial determinants, in that interplay and competition between monks and priests define the religious experience itself. Thus, religious experience is not a static system of meaning forever frozen in the sacred texts scripted by the Brahmins, but a live and evolving system marked by competition, hierarchy and usurpation, not unlike the world of caste relations.

Moreover, ascetics may uphold, rather than transcend the ideology of caste. Burghart notes that many ascetic sects differentially grade the spiritual value and attainment of their various internal branches: The Nimbarkis and Ramanujis distinguish between members with Twice-born bodies and those with Once-born bodies; the Dasnami Sanyasis are divided into Paramhansa and Dandi branches with the former claiming superiority and a higher level of knowledge. The Ramanandis of Janakpur whom Burghart studies are also divided between Tyagis and Mahatyagis with distinct disciplines of devotion and renunciation.\(^{20}\)

Dumont’s theory, standing as it on the life-stage model, is likely to collapse if the ascetic refuses to acknowledge the division between the householder/houseless.

---

\(^{19}\) Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: the Management of Religious Experience and Identity in a North Indian Pilgrimage Centre* (Delhi: OUP, 1989).

\(^{20}\) *ibid.*, pp. 645-50.
Ethnographic data would suggest that there have arisen many sectarian traditions whose leaders have effectively rendered useless the dichotomy of renouncer/householder and caste/casteless, or sect. While all sects hold out a promise of liberation from the transient world, they differ in their conception of it and the correct or the true path to transcend this transient world. So divergent are the prescribed modes of severing links with the *samsara* that what may classify as legitimate renunciatory practice from the point of one sect may be disqualified from the point of view of another as totally worthless. Burghart cites the examples of the Ramanandis and Kabirpanthis to illustrate this: Ramanandis insist that a desire-less state—a necessary prerequisite for liberation—may be attained only by undertaking a vow of celibacy and ejecting from family life; the Kabirpanthis, on the other hand, distinguishing between a vow of celibacy and a vow of sexual abstinence, believe in the adequacy of "celibacy in marriage" [Emphasis added] and feel no need to renounce their families in order to "attain the unconditioned state of eternity".\(^\text{21}\) For this the Ramanandis do not regard the Kabirpanthis as true ascetics while the Kabirpanthis, unconcerned with the houseless/householder distinction, adopt a wholly neutral attitude towards the Ramanandis. It might be added here of course that Dumont's reliance on the life-stage model would not allow for the recognition of Kabirpanthis as true ascetics on account of their low caste status, since the life-stage model is premised on the performance of sacrifices, allowed only to the Twice-born householders.\(^\text{22}\)

\(^{21}\) *ibid.*, p. 643.
\(^{22}\) *ibid.*, pp. 643-4.
Saurabh Dube’s study of the Satnami of Chhattisgarh “explores the symbolic construction of a subordinate religious initiative that carved for itself a distinctive position within the ritual hierarchies” of the caste order in its attempt to reconstitute the ascribed status of Chamars by incorporating them as Satnami. The Satnami Guru, head of the organization hierarchy, combined the twin characteristics of truth and purity and the attributes of the Raja aadmi (kingly person), the latter derived from the schemes of ritually fashioned kingship within the caste system. The Guru, “ever the householder” and the “living symbol of worship” among the Satnamis, provided a most interesting counterpoint to Dumontian notion of asceticism.

Romila Thapar, in discussing the asrama theory, as it was formulated and developed in the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions, argues that even though the opposition between attachment and non-attachment, householder and renouncer, may be counter-posed as stark opposites, it is still useful to take into account the interplay between the two categories. This interplay is not fuzzed over even in the Buddhist tradition where the dialectic is made yet more implicit by reducing the asrama stages to two: the gahapati and the bhikkhu. The householder is ever cognizant of his obligations towards the renouncer as is indeed the renouncer “when he intervenes in social action, as many do on occasion by demonstrating their powers…” The partial nature of Dumont’s contention that the asrama theory displays a marked hostility to renunciation by limiting sanyasa to the last stage is made explicit by

---


25 ibid., p. 275.
Thapar who notes that *grihastha* was not stipulated as necessary among the Jain and Buddhist traditions. The Brahmanical insistence on *grihastha* as a prerequisite for true renunciation as laid down by Manu, may have been an attempt to neutralize the entry into monkhood at a very young age, which was being encouraged by the Jains and Buddhists. The circumvention of *grihastha* imperilled the performance of the *yaga* and threatened the curtailment of *dana* that accrued from it to the Brahmins.26

**Gender and Renunciation:**

The debate about the man-in-the-world and individual-outside-the world, one will notice, is primarily, even solely, about men. Renunciation is either placed outside the map of gender distinctions and characterized as ungendered, or else it is willy-nilly identified with masculinity (recall Burghart’s statement about how the ascetic pays off his debts to his ancestors by storing his seed). Though there has been a proliferation of interest on the subject of women and religiosity in South Asia,27 most often, women’s religious lives have been interrogated and described in their status as householders; only recently have studies focused on the asceticism of women who have shunned householdership.28

The most appropriate and codified religious roles for women lie in the domain of the household. The primary moral and religious duty of a married woman is *pativrata dharma*: those actions that are directed towards the welfare of her husband

---

26 *ibid.*, pp. 280-1.


28 A recent welcome compilation in this field is Sondra L. Hausner and Ann Grodzins Gold (eds.), *Nuns, Yoginis, Saints and Singers: Women’s Renunciation in South Asia* (Delhi: Zubaan, 2007).
and all that is related to him—his home, kin group, and the performance of his duties towards his ancestors and deities. Indeed, it is she who by begetting him sons, enables him to pay off his debts to ancestors and attain liberation. The two primary vehicles towards the fulfilment of this duty, dharma, are the numerous votive rites or vratas that women observe, and sati, the ritual ending of life on the dead husband's pyre—the essence and epitome of a woman's pativrata dharma. The Dharmashastras and Smritis lay down that it is in performing her wifely and motherly duties that a woman fulfils her religious duties, which in any case remain submerged or conjoined with that of her husband's. Mary McGee notes that the compilers of religious texts do not discount the possibility of liberation for women, which might accrue from her observing vratas but prescribe saubhagya or marital felicity as the ultimate good for her. 29

Renunciation of traditional wifely roles would imply the withdrawal of the woman's reproductive capacities and the disruption of the normative order of samsara. Not surprisingly, there is a deep mistrust and antagonism in religious traditions towards women who fail to fulfil their ideal prescribed role. This has resulted in the denial of woman's right to salvation. Women are not considered legitimate soteriological agents with texts and scriptures abounding in misogynist views. They are never the renouncers, but constitute par excellence that what is renounced. Women represent maya, the illusory and transient material world that draws the 'self' into unending

cycles of bondage. This denial of soteriological agency to women has its roots in a deep-seated contempt—a kind of 'gynophobia'—for women's bodily processes such as menstruation, reproduction and their sexuality. As purported bearers of uncontrollable libido, not only are women incapacitated for the project of salvation, but are also perceived as snares and temptations for the male spiritual aspirants.

B.D. Tripathi noted that the attitude of the sadhus toward women ranged from abject hatred to glorification.

Indeed all those women—from the widow, to the ascetic, to the prostitute—who do not subscribe to these given role models, are condemned to a process of 'othering'. While the renunciant rejects marriage and family life, the widow steadfastly holds on to hers by avowing a loyalty to her dead husband; nonetheless in the absence of a male guardian, they both come to be identified as one. Similarly, a parallel is drawn between the renunciant, who though rejecting worldly ties of marriage, professes love for the lord and declared herself the bride of the lord, and the prostitute, who becomes a bride everyday. They are both nitya sumangali—eternal brides. This dissolving of difference between various categories of women who transcend social norms is a feature, says Vijaya Ramaswamy, of both orthodox and heterodox faiths.

---

32 Women's sexuality unless tamed by motherhood always remains dangerous. Lynn Bennett studies the contrast between 'dangerous wives' and 'sacred sisters' in her study of high caste Nepali women. Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High-Caste Women in Nepal (Kathmandu: Mandala Publishers).
Following Dumont, Marglin constructs an opposition between the auspicious housewife and the renouncer, always a male.

"The maleness of purity can perhaps be reflected in the term used for 'pure spirit', namely purusa, a word which can also have the meaning for a 'male person'... pure spirit refers to the value pursued by or characteristic of the renouncer (sanyasi), the seeker of salvation. This person is a man and cannot have a wife. He is an ascetic. *A woman cannot become a renouncer...she must first be born as man...*"  

This does not however mean that female renouncers have been completely absent or unknown in Indian history and culture. The challenge to orthodox Brahmanism's revulsion towards the possibility of women's spiritual pursuits came from heterodox traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism, which admitted of women's right and equality to seek salvation, even making institutional arrangements towards this. But even so, a trace of gynophobia could be detected. One may recall here Buddha's initial reluctance in ordaining women into monastic orders and the imposition of extra eight rules for nuns that perpetually bound them in a position of subordination to monks. Nevertheless, early records provide testimony to the amazing

36 Legend holds that the Buddha extracted from the nuns a promise to follow these rules as a price for allowing them to found their own Order (Bhikkhshuni-sangha). These rules are:
1. Any nun, no matter how long she has been in the order, must treat any monk, even the rudest novice, as if he were her senior.
2. Nuns should not take up residence during the annual rainy season retreat in any place where monks were not available to supervise them.
3. Monks should set the dates for bi-weekly assemblies
4. During the ceremony at the end of the rainy season retreat, when monks and nuns invited criticism from their own communities, the nuns must also invite criticism from the monks.
5. Monks must share in setting and supervising penances for the nuns.
accomplishments of Buddhist nuns—as composers of stanzas, as generous donors to Buddhist monuments and buildings, and even as recipient of gifts. From 3rd c. A.D. onwards, however, there was a downturn in their fortunes as they slid from a position of relative affluence and privilege to poverty and obscurity and eventual decline and disappearance. Falk attributes the decline of the nuns’ orders to Buddhism’s attempts to reconcile two distinctive, and somewhat contradictory understandings of sexual difference. The first, based on Buddhist precepts, tends to view sexual difference as a consequence of the inherently “fallen state” of humans. These differences would gradually be effaced as one proceeded on the path of “spiritual perfection” by mastering the hold of desires. At the same time, Buddhist tradition was not untouched by the surrounding patriarchal norms of Hindu orthodoxy, which placed a premium on womanly roles of the dutiful wife and the bountiful mother. It is the absorption of these norms, which, according to Falk, result in the denigration of nuns’ achievements and spiritual capabilities. Therefore, she argues, while Buddhist literature is replete with laudatory references to pious laywomen, nuns appear in these mostly as a source of discomfort and embarrassment.

G.S. Ghurye’s *Indian Sadhus* traces the rise, history, work and present organization of Hindu asceticism and refers, although only in passing, to the presence of female

---

6. Monks must share in the ordination of nuns.
7. Nuns must never revile or abuse the monks.
8. Nuns must never reprimand monks directly.


37 Falk, *ibid.*, p. 163.
ascetics. Insofar as Ghurye acknowledges their presence, he is at a loss to account for the incidence of young unmarried girls in the female orders. In his own words:

That a certain proportion of Hindu women should turn away from life is understandable. The larger proportion of ascetic women however is formed by females who enter asceticism after their marriage or as girls. In the former case, a number of domestic circumstances conspire to create disgust for life. The source of recruitment of those sadhvis who are initiated in their girlhood is not known.38

More than lack of ethnographic or empirical evidence, it was the way in which analytical categories were constructed and the terms of debate set that inherently precluded the possibility of acknowledging and including female renouncers in earlier studies. In recent years, there has been an attempt to move away from the exclusively male-oriented perception of asceticism to unravel the ways in which women are implicated in it. While critical of the androcentric nature of the existing body of knowledge, there is no consensus on the modes and nature of female asceticism in this recent scholarship.

Gender and Renunciation: Moving away from Androcentricism

The dissent Bhakti movements could be seen as powerful illustrations of how the feminine may be central to at least certain kinds of renunciatory projects. One of the principal metaphors of religious experience in this tradition has been love, seen almost invariably from the perspective of a woman, either as a painful phase of

separation and longing or ecstatic union with the divine lover. The spiritual urge comes to mimic the fierce 'womanly' sexual urge and even male saints take on a feminine voice, while the women saints themselves abandon and renounce their earthly ties for the love of the Lord to become his wife. By foregrounding the 'feminine' qualities of surrender, compassion and nurturance, Bhakti movements created space for women saints to subvert the everyday normative gender roles required of them. Reversal is the leitmotif of Bhakti. Reversal of all that the Dharmashastras represent: the pre-eminence of the masculine over the feminine and the upper caste over the lower caste. An upper caste saint then would have to renounce his pride, privilege and wealth and embrace poverty, dishonour and self-effacement/abasement. The woman saint, by virtue of her sex, requires no such conversion. According to Ramanujan, a female saint typically displays five phases:

- Early dedication to God: Not bound to a man, the woman saint is dedicated at an early age to God, her first love.
- Denial of marriage: The woman saint may sometimes be married and leave her husband for her true and only love, the God, or if widowed, refuse the entrapments of widowhood to indicate the negation of her first marriage. Thus women like Mira, Gauri and Venkamma (a Vairashaiva saint), following from their refusal to recognize the validity of the earthly marriage in the first place, defy sati and other practices associated with widowhood.

---

39 See A.K. Ramanujan, "On Women Saints", in J. Hawley and D. Wulff (eds.), The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p. 316. There exist some Tantric sects that regard women as indispensable to their goal of liberation. Women constitute one of the five M's that lead to moksha: maithuna (sexual intercourse), mansa (meat), madya (wine), meena (fish), mudra (yogic poses). See Tripathi, Sadhus of India, op. cit., p. 193.
• Defiance of societal norms: The woman saints display behaviour which typically subverts social norms and inverts established hierarchies. This may include abandoning modesty to roam naked (Lalla and Mahadevi) or demonstrating miracles to elders and male saints which questions their authority.

• Initiation: Notwithstanding the violation of dominant social codes, the saintliness of female saints is legitimated by male figures of authority, who test their resolve for a life of renunciation and initiate them into it.

• Marriage to the Lord: The woman saint declares herself the bride of the Lord. 40

Ramaswamy’s study of ‘anti-Brahmanical’ and heterodox religious initiatives such as the Mahanubhava, Warkari and Ramdasi panths in medieval Maharashtra attests to the draw of these movements for women and lower orders of the society like tailors, carpenters and potters. Without questioning the belief that it was karma that resulted in gender and caste inequalities, the Warkari saints, by extending the path of devotion and salvation to all, still managed to invert existing ideological norms. Indeed many women poets, composers and saints rose to prominence within these panths, the most notable being Janabai, Chakkubai, Muktabai, Premabai and Soryabai among others. In fact, one folk tradition credits Janabai with having composed 12.5 crores out of the total 96 crores abhangs attributed to Namdev. 41

More than 80 per cent of the women saints belonged to the untouchable/lower

caste. The extent to which the Warkari panth subverted Brahmanical codes could be assessed from the fact that while orthodox traditions assigned a negative value to female renouncers by comparing them to prostitutes—a prostitute called Kanhopatra was accepted as a saint in the Warkari panth. This socially deviant figure of the prostitute was thus recuperated and firmly located within the realm of the spiritual.\textsuperscript{42}

Even the Mahanubhava panth, which with its esotericism tended to alienate the common people, was radical in its attack on the Vedas and favoured the opening of its monastic orders to women.\textsuperscript{43} The \textit{Lilacharita}, a hagiographical account of its founder, Chakradhar, records that women far outnumbered men in his order. Other Mahanubhava texts too document the names of influential women disciples such as Mahadaisa, Umaisa, Abaisa and Sobhagem. Indeed so great was the visibility of these female disciples that a male Brahmin devotee is said to have raised an objection, only to be rebuffed by Chakradhar thus: “Why should these women not come here for the sake of religion? Is there any difference between your soul and their souls?”\textsuperscript{44}

The Ramdasi panth extended the boundaries of this radicalism even further and for the first time, women actually rose to become monastic heads and administrators of \textit{mathas}. The spiritual successor of Samartha Ramdas, the sect’s founder, was Venabai. She alone had the right to initiate disciples and conduct \textit{Ramkirtan}, the most significant element of the panth’s religiosity. Akkabai, who headed the \textit{mathas} at

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item ibid., p. 248.
\item ibid., p. 246.
\item ibid., p. 247.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Chaphal and Parli, is said to have warded off a Mughal attack on the mathas and even extended help to the Maratha chief Sahu in his campaign against the Mughals. 45

These Bhakti movements then tend to unsettle the certainties of Dumont's oppositions: the entry of lower castes and women into the realm of the spiritual—even a privileging of their socially inferior status—cut sharply at the binary oppositions of Twice-born and Once-born, man-woman, Brahmin-outcaste, and purity-pollution. Not only do we see monastic heads engaged in mundane matters such as wars; the sharp division between householder and renouncer also fades away since a householder has as much right to become a Warkari as the ascetic who had renounced his household. Indeed the figure of Bahinbai—who flouted not only domestic injunctions by pursuing the path of devotion despite her married status, but also Brahmanical norms by choosing the Shudra Tukaram as her guru—demonstrates that any understanding of renunciation based exclusively on Brahmanical norms is only fractional.

Other examples of Hindu women saints who undertook their spiritual pursuits without repudiating their marriages can be cited. Anandamayi Ma, the Bengali saint, revered by her devotees as a goddess, for instance, married at the age of 13, was given to spiritual experiences from a very young age. Her marriage remained unconsummated, as she would lose consciousness each time her husband approached her for sexual relations. In the end, realizing her spiritual qualities, her husband received initiation under Anandamayi. 46 More striking is the case of the

43 ibid., p. 253.
contemporary Tantra saint, Madhobi Ma (Nectar Mother), who was also married at a young age. Driven by deep spiritual yearnings, she took initiation into the Shakta Tantra tradition barely a few years after her marriage. Her initiation did not however render her marriage void as she gave birth to three children, who constituted her “worldly family”.

Nonetheless it would be wrong to conclude that Bhakti movements did not constrain their own radicalism, or that there was never a conflict between the womanly duties of marriage and motherhood on the one hand and spiritual calling. Renunciant discourses, even those of Bhakti and heterodox religions exhibit a particular ambiguity in that while they do open up spaces for women to question and sometimes to invert tradition, that is, to seize their moments of power and autonomy, they do not eschew completely the overall cultural structuring of renunciation itself as an overwhelmingly male calling. Vijaya Ramaswamy refers to this ambiguity as “women in, women out” in her study of Medieval Bhakti movements.

In the same Maharashtrian panths that one found the rise of woman saints, poets and administrators, one can detect misogyny reminiscent of more orthodox traditions. Jnaneshwar, the Warkari guru, was a fervent champion of sati: “A devoted woman would not shun a death that gave her an opportunity to ascend the funeral pyre of her ‘praneshwar’, her husband, who is her very breath as well as her god.”

49 ibid., p. 251.
The same Chakradhar who defended the spiritual rights of women, denigrates women as the dangerous 'other', the mere sight of whom may cause the fall of great spiritual:

"Woman is the chief of intoxicating substances. Other substances intoxicate by being used; woman intoxicates just by being seen. You should not even look at the picture of a woman..."^30

This conflict between stridharma and swadharma may sometimes be resolved in interesting ways. We have already noticed how the devotion towards Lord may be framed in kinship terminology, that is, by referring to devotion as a heavenly marriage and the Lord as a heavenly consort. Here, the resolution remains partial, as a tension between the actual conjugal couple is perpetually palpable. The case of the jivit satimatas demonstrates how the conflict between socially prescribed ideals of womanhood and personal yearnings for renunciation may be averted by actually combining ascetic and wifely duties.

The cult of satimatas is of relatively recent origin, following the criminalization of sati in the colonial period.^31 Jivit satimatas are those women who expressed a desire to commit sati, but were prevented from doing so by their kinsmen for fear of prosecution. Denied the fulfilment of their pativratadharma, these women then undertook a life of extreme austerity and piety, thus attracting like ascetics do, followings of laypeople, who sought their blessings and gifts of miraculous powers, especially healing. While renouncers are believed to be able to transcend sensory

---

^30 ibid., p. 253.
perceptions by their tapa, or the heat of their meditation, the satimates are kept alive by the heat of their pativratadharma. The hagiography of Balasatimata valorises her as a saint who requires no worldly resources for her existence. Their detachment from the world led Harlan to comment, "the living satimata remains in this world but is no longer of it..." This approximates the ideal-typical definition of a renouncer.

What is also significant is that as a young woman, Balasatimata (born Rup Kumari) exhibited a disavowal towards marriage as she believed herself to be dedicated to her spiritual husband, Krishna. At the age of 16, she was engaged to one Junkar Singh, who came down with high fever when the priest joined the bride and groom's hands during the ceremony. Junkar could never recover from this and passed away nine days after the wedding. Thus Rup Kumari's celibacy was protected. Her hagiography records that she displayed no grief at her husband's death, and that her asceticism intensified rapidly thereafter, and concluded finally, in her recognition as a satimata. We are stuck by how closely this resembles Ramanujan's delineation of the early stages of a woman saint's career. Popular contemporary renditions of Balasatimata's life on the other hand occlude Rup Kumari's indifference to her widowhood, insisting on basing her cult upon her unfulfilled wish to burn on her husband's pyre. Pativratadharma thus supersedes swadharma; indeed one's spiritual powers and capacities seem to flow from pativratadharma itself.

52 ibid., p. 191.
53 The official hagiography locates the episode of her desire to become sati not at the time of her husband's death but links it to the death of her beloved adopted son. ibid., p. 196.
54 ibid., p. 196.
Contemporary studies of Female Renouncers:

Catherine Clementine Ojha was the first to draw attention to the presence of "feminine monastic communities" in Benaras. Conducting the first study of its kind, the initial problem Ojha faced was in identifying such women, even in Benaras, the Hindu holy city par excellence. Not only were female ascetics very few in numbers but most of them also lacked the external markers of an ascetic identity thus making it difficult to distinguish them from the lay female population. Nor was the distinction clear to laypeople who misunderstood Ojha's project as one on widows and indeed directed her to a widows' home. Following her survey of three monastic communities in Benaras—two owing allegiance to the Vaishnava sect, and the third founded by the charismatic spiritual leader, Anandamayi Ma—Ojha concluded that the major difference between male and female ascetic is that while the former chooses sanyasa over householder/grihastha, the female ascetic does not have this choice; she abdicates the only ideal prescribed for her—that of stridharma. "She has left the ideal behind."56

Denton following, quite literally in Ojha's footsteps in her choice of Benaras as the site of fieldwork, echoes her views when she writes that "a woman who rejects or renounces householdership does not simply enter an alternate lifestyle, but embraces a set of values profoundly different from those of the ideal wife and mother in Hindu society."57 In Denton's view, ascetic women uphold the primacy of salvation

56 ibid., p. W36.
and devalue householdership thus drawing a sharp boundary between the ascetic and householder.

While Denton views the female ascetics in active opposition to the female householders, Meena Khandelwal in her study of the Dashnami sanyasinis dismisses the claim that sanyasinis invert the normative feminine ideals, by concentrating instead on the continuities between the situation of female householder and renunciants. The sanyasinis that Khandelwal studies liken themselves to female householders emphasizing commonalities such as a male threat and the restriction of independent decisions and travel, which constrict their ability to lead a full and free life of the renunciant. She contests and challenges the notion prevalent in earlier studies such as that by Philimore on celibate women in the Himalayas where she argues that women renunciants mimic male idioms in order to gain legitimacy in a mendicant order. Khandelwal, on the other hand, pays close attention to the ways in which the womanly qualities of love, compassion and motherhood may be the preferred expressions of renouncers, even male renouncers.

Despite their differences, these studies offer some of the most powerful critiques of the hegemonic models of the study of religion and renunciation pioneered by Dumont, and followed by his admirers and critics alike.

59 Khandelwal, “Ungendered Atma, Masculine Virility and Feminine Compassion”, op. cit., p. 103.
Implications for the Study of Jain Women Ascetics:

How well suited are the formulations of Dumont, his critics, and of those which focus exclusively on women renouncers, to the understanding of Jain renunciation in general, and female renunciation among Jains in particular? Several themes emerging from the above discussion can be fruitfully deployed to gain an insight into Jain female asceticism. These are: opposition between renouncer and householder; the field of inter-sectarian rivalry; internal organization of the ascetic community.

Renouncer and Householder:

The first issue which arises from the discussion of sociological theories of renunciation concerns the relationship between the categories of renouncer and householder. As already noted, Jain religiosity is imbued with the values of asceticism. Householders may traverse the path of spiritual progress through a series of eleven stages called pratimas. Pratimas are like a ladder, each rung signifying a higher degree of asceticism. In the third stage, samayika pratima, a householder resolves to practice samayika (meditation) at least three times a day, thereby equalling the minimum amount of meditation prescribed for a mendicant. As one approaches the sixth pratima, ratribhakta pratima, one resolves to limit sexual activity to night time alone; sexual activity is completely shunned on reaching the seventh stage of brahmacharya pratima. Jainism, we see therefore, prescribes celibacy within marriage qua Burghart.

And yet, the Dumontian distinction between renouncer and householder remains a valid one for Jains, for it is ascetics alone who are the living models of the ideal of

61 For a full list of pratimas, see ibid., p. 186.
asceticism, and are thereby distinguished from the mass of householders. Jain renunciation is conceived of and commonly perceived as a state of being that negates the household. This is recognized even among Digambars who regard, at least theoretically, their female mendicants, as spiritually advanced laywomen, and not as full-fledged ascetics. They are nonetheless distinguished from householders as a distinct class of women who have renounced domesticity and samsara for a life of asceticism. But in studying female renouncers, we will need to push beyond the conception of separate categories. The works of Denton and Khandelwal sensitize us to the urgency of examining the perceived continuities or disjunctions between the values and lives of female renouncers and female householders. Confirming Denton's conclusions, many of the female ascetics I interviewed, both Digambar and Shvetambar, wished to clearly demarcate their lives and values from their counterparts in the household. Repeatedly, Jain nuns spoke of their vairagya in active opposition to the samsaric obligations of husband, family and children. They invariably espoused their life as superior and more fulfilling than anything that women were capable of achieving in marriage and family. At the same time, there was also a recognition of the commonalities shared with grihastha women: male dominance, vulnerability to sexual and physical violence, and so on.

Where Dumont's theory fails is not in devising two separate categories, but the manner in which he seals off these two categories—as if the two do not impinge upon and influence each other—casting the ascetic as thoroughly otherworldly, and the householder as totally immersed in samsara. What I shall argue instead is that it is the crisscrossing ties between the mendicants and laity that give shape to the
community, and that it is difficult to understand the preponderance of Jains nuns without being sensitive to the strong inter-linkages between mendicants and laity.

Indeed, Tambiah has advised the suitability of jettisoning the opposition between the individual ascetic and the householder in favour of one of between the religious monastic community and the lay household.62 His focus is early Buddhist sangha where the Dumontian ideal of individual-outside the society is undercut in many ways. First, Buddhist monks were not isolated individuals but bonded together in a brotherhood of the sangha, which engaged in collective rituals and collective deliberations and thus marked itself off from other sects of renouncers and laity. Second, the prohibition on work, even cooking, rendered the monks absolutely dependent on the laity for their material survival. Finally, Tambiah says, in the context of Shvetambar Jains: monks or ascetics are the paragons of the ideals that every Jain, even a layman, must uphold to some degree in their everyday lives. In that sense, Tambiah says, the Jains exhibit a greater continuity between the householders’ and mendicants’ lives.

To address the question of “subdued hostility to renunciation,” which results in Dumont’s view in the pushing back of renunciation to the last stage of a householder’s life. We would do well to remember that Jainism’s earliest adherents were not householders but ascetics, nirgranthis (the bondless ones), and it was only gradually that a lay community came over to Jainism. Its earliest extant texts are monastic codebooks, dealing explicitly with ascetic discipline. In these books, we find none of the hostility to renunciation that Dumont mentions; on the contrary,

---

marriage, family and the worldly obligations associated with such institutions, are only described as impediments to the path of salvation.

One such text, *Sutrakritanga Sutra*, in fact catalogues the horrors of domesticity by providing a glimpse into the lives of the monks who break the vow of *brahmacharya*. Those captivated by the pleasures promised by marriage are shown as being reduced to mere errand boys for their wives: fetching fruits and cooking when she wishes to eat, fanning her when she feels hot, painting, catering to her every whim when she is pregnant, and becoming a nurse and “beast of burden” when their child is born. This section concludes with the warning: “This has been done by many men who for the sake of pleasures have stooped so low; they become the equal of slaves, animals, servants, beasts of burden—mere nobodies.”

So evidently, while there is a tension between *samsara* and renunciation, in Jainism, it is resolved not by delaying renunciation to the last stage of one’s life but by favouring renunciation over householdership, and by emphasizing ascetic practices even within a householder’s existence.

Moreover, even contemporary data demonstrates that Jain renouncers have taken initiation into mendicancy not at a late stage in their lives, having fulfilled the obligations of *samsara*, but *before* they were hemmed in by such worldly duties. My own fieldwork data contradicts the Brahmanical model of renunciation of the four *ashramas* espoused by Dumont. Increasing number of sadhvis are neither widows nor old women having lived the full life of a householder, but primarily young unmarried

---

women who have taken diksha. Of the total 65 sadhvis interviewed, an overwhelming 61 had received ordination in an unmarried state. The age at the time of diksha for sadhvis who had never been married varied from nine years to 29 years, with the bulk of sadhvis taking diksha when they were 13-16 years of age. (See Appendix I for full details).

This data in turn also complicates the apparent contradiction between stridharma and swadharma, a point raised by scholars of gender and religion. It would appear that there do exist alternative models of female religiosity among Jains that enable woman to eschew the limits of stridharma to focus on their self as merit-and-salvation-seeking agents, that is, to fulfill their swadharma. Indeed, a whole repertoire of positive images, ranging from pious nuns, chaste wives, and mothers of tirthankaras provides cultural validation of the choice of young women to renounce marriage in favour of vairagya.

Internal Organization and Hierarchy in Female Mendicant Orders:
The second issue that Dumont's critics and scholars arguing for gendered analysis of renunciation raise pertains to his dismissal of the category of power from the realm of renunciation, which in his view is a domain untouched by samsaric norms. In a riposte to Dumont, Cort has demonstrated how caste and kinship patterns are reflected in the way mendicant orders are structured.64

A survey of the internal organization of mendicant orders reveals a strongly hierarchical character, with clearly defined authority structures in place. Though in Cort's view, sadhvi orders are not as internally differentiated as sadhus', hierarchical tendency can be discerned among Jain nuns too. Hierarchy among the Murtipujaks

takes the following order: at the bottom of the pecking order are sadhvis; a unit (mandala or thada) of such sadhvis may be headed by a ganini (also agrini or guruni), usually the senior most sadhvi, appointed for life; above a number of such groups, each with its own agrini, is to be found a pravarttini, and a special title of mahattara may be bestowed upon a select number of very learned, disciplined and exceptionally respected nuns. Balbir found that some Gacchs might take the two titles of pravarttini and mahattara as identical, while others may clearly distinguish between the two.\(^65\) Nonetheless, mahattaras are few and far between. In the Tapa Gacch for instance, Sumangla ji alone enjoys the status of mahattara.\(^66\) When a group acquires a large number of shishyas, a guruni may re-divide the group and send them on vihara in a different direction, appointing another senior sadhvi as its head, who remains all the same under obedience to the guruni.

Diagramatically, we may represent the hierarchy as such:

```
Mahattara
   | Pravarttini
   |   | Ganini
   |   |   | Sadhvi
```

An additional rank of uppravarttini, subordinate to the pravarttini, can be found in the Sthanakvasi monastic orders.

We should not construe the category of 'sadhvi' as an undifferentiated one, for even without formal padvis, sadhvis who are senior on account of their age, period of

\(^{65}\) Nalini Balbir, "Women in Jainism in India", op. cit., p. 86.
\(^{66}\) Interview at Atmanand Jain Sabha, Roop Nagar, Delhi.
initiation and learning are revered and respected by younger and junior sadhvis. As they gain experience, many sadhvis may be allowed to initiate disciples independently without breaking off from their *ganini/agrini*. Thus at a given time, a unit of sadhvis may consist of an *agrini*, her disciples, and even the disciples of her disciples. The *thada* at Atmanand Jain Sabha would thus be illustrated as in the schematic representation 1.1 (see preceding chapter). The flow of authority from *guruni* (preceptor) to disciples is visible here. Even as sadhvis may take on *shishyas*, they remain under the overall authority of the *agrini*. A similar diagrammatic depiction of authority relations among a unit of Sthanakvasi sadhvis is given in the Figure 1.2 (preceding chapter).

Given its highly centralized character, a single sadhvi *pramukha* presides over the entire female mendicant population in the Terapanth. The sadhvi *pramukha*, along with a group of about 10 sadhvis, follows the acharya in all his *viharas* and is knowledgeable about his decisions relating to the *gana* and communicates this to other sadhvis. The remaining sadhvis are subdivided into smaller groups called *singhadas*, each headed by an *agrigani* or *agrigani*.* Agriganis* are not necessarily appointed for life but may be changed from time to time. On the occasion of the annual great gathering, they hand back the custody of the group under her charge to the acharya.67

Below this rank exist a series of grades, including intermediate classes of novices, crafted by the reformist and modernist Acharya Tulsi in 1980. These recent categories, viz., *upasaks, mumukshus* and *samanis*, act as links between the ascetics.

---

proper and the laity. **Upasaks** are religious students who undertake limited formal vows. They dress in white cotton clothes and receive instruction in Jainism. One of the important duties of the **upasaks** is to cook for the higher category of novices, the **samanis**. It usually lasts for about a year or two. **Mumukshus** are a class of laywomen who have taken a vow of celibacy though not yet ordained into the monastic order. This period of probation allows young girls to practice temporary renunciation and engage in a systematic study of Jainism in an institutional location, following which they can either progress further in the path of renunciation leading to **samani** and sadhvi diksha, or return home to a householder’s life.\(^6\) A girl desirous of taking **samani diksha** must necessarily complete seven years of the **mumuksha** course before that. The status of **samanis** is highest among all novices as they are partial mendicants. They wear special white clothes called **kanach**; tie a white handkerchief instead of the **muhpatti** of a fully initiated sadhvi and lack the latter’s whiskbroom. Like sadhvis, there is a prohibition on **samanis** to light fire, and yet they are not allowed to seek alms, leaving **upasaks** to cook for them.

As is evident, there is a clear hierarchy even among novices. Fully initiated sadhvis are of course considered superior to those in the intermediate categories. In addition to the statuses of **upasaks**, **mumukshus**, **samanis**, sadhvis and sadhvi pramukha there exist other ranks: **agrini**, leader of a group of nuns, as is noted above; the head of the **samanis** is referred to as a **niyojika**; chief of a group of **samanis** is called a **nirdeshika**; **sanyojika** is head of the **mumukshus**, while **yojika** heads a unit of **mumukshus**. Thus

\(^6\) Because there is no prohibition on the **mumukshus** undertaking travel by train or air, many of these become the ambassadors of the Jain faith, travelling to distant places, within India and abroad, where a huge Jain diaspora lives, to lecture and teach the Jain religious values and practices.
Acharya Tulsi’s reforms mooted not only new categories but also ensured that each of these categories remained under the control of the Terapanth through a well-defined chain of command.

The structure of the female monastic hierarchy among the Terapanthi sect may be represented as below:

```
Sadhvi pramukha
 | Agrini
 | Sadhvi
 | Nirdeshika
  | Samani
   | Sanyojika
    | Yojika
     | Mumukshu
      | Upasika
```

Digambars have since the beginning evolved a three-tiered hierarchy, graded by the severity of discipline. As one moves up the hierarchy, the codes of discipline become progressively harsh. A fully initiated Digambar nun is called aryika, and addressed commonly with the honorific ‘mata ji’. She is duty-bound to practice lacha by plucking hair, possesses only one set of garment, an 8-metre-long sari tied around in a knot. The aryika undertakes all her travels on foot and receives alms in her palms.

---

Kshullikas and alikas (literally small or miniscule) correspond to the 10th and 11th stage of the pratima scheme of spiritual progress of an ideal Jain layperson.  

Belonging technically still to the category of layperson, albeit in an advanced stage, kshullikas and alikas practice lotha more as a training exercise. They are also allowed to use scissors, that is, it is not incumbent upon her to pluck her hair out. Kshullika is not debarred from travelling in vehicles if absolutely necessary and wearing sandals while walking. She receives and eats her gochari in a plate, belonging either to the shravaks or herself. Kshullikas and alikas may be attached to a group of aryikas, staying and travelling permanently with them; alternatively, they may form a group, which follows the acharya closely in his travels and abode. Below this stage is a novice of a still lower order, the brahmacharini, which corresponds to the sixth stage of the eleven-step pratimas, wherein the vow of celibacy is assumed. Apart from this, the vows are not very different from pious laywomen. They travel and live with aryikas or kshullikas, and are never alone.

Those considered capable of withstanding the extreme austerities required of the higher stages may directly be ordained into the monastic group as an aryika. Some kshullikas may graduate to the status of aryikas while others may remain in this stage through their full lives. Flugel has drawn a parallel between the Terapanthi grades and the differential stages of Digambar asceticism: While the status of kshullikas is comparable to that of mumukshus, the upasaks lie somewhere between the stage of

---

70 Jaini, Jaina Path of Purification, op. cit, p. 186.
brahmacharini and an advanced laywoman on the verge of abandoning the household.\footnote{Flugel, “The Codes of Conduct of the Terapanth Saman Order,” \textit{op. cit.}, p. 9.}

In addition to the formal \textit{padvis}, informal honorifics may be bestowed upon senior sadhvis, reflecting the wisdom, achievements and glory of the mendicants without entailing any temporal responsibility that official \textit{padvis} do. The title “\textit{Jain kranti}” (Jain Revolution) was therefore appended to Dr. Maju sri’s name as a mark of recognition of her efforts to edify Jain about the status of nuns; some other titles I came across were “\textit{Sangathan Prerika}” (Inspiration for the Community), “\textit{Chhattisgarh Shiromani}” (the Jewel of Chattisgarh), “\textit{Shasana Jyoti}” (The Light of Jainism); Sumangla ji (Tapa Gacch) was conferred two titles: “\textit{Marudhar Singhini}” (The Desert Tigress) and “\textit{Shasana Deepika}” (The Light of Jainism).

\textbf{Domestication of the Monastic Community:}

What interests us here most is the gendered nature of such hierarchy, which will be referred to as “Domestication of the ascetic sangha”. The term ‘domestication’ has been employed in an entirely different sense by Carrithers: he uses it to refer to the rise and consolidation of the authority of semi-ascetics—\textit{yatis} and \textit{bhattachaks}—in medieval mendicant orders. I am using it to describe the replication of the domestic power structures characterized by male authority and female subordination in the Jain ascetic organization.

Shanta writes that even the higher ranks among sadhvis do not necessarily signify any real authority, as even a \textit{guruni}, \textit{agrini}, \textit{pravarttini} and \textit{mahattara} remain under the over-
arching authority of the acharya and gacchadhipati. The latter are posts which are denied to female ascetics. The highest a sadhvi can rise to is the rank of mahattara, while the higher positions of acharya, upadhyaya and gacchadhipati remain the exclusive preserve of male mendicants. Nalini Balbir finds no records of the title of acharya being used for a nun.

Theoretically, however, a female acharya is not an absolute impossibility. The Vyanahara Sutra, one of the early texts, recognizes the possibility of a female acharya and upadhyaya, though with a caveat: a sadhvi could be raised to the rank of upadhyaya thirty years after her initiation, whereas the intervening period for a muni to be promoted to the same rank is merely three years; likewise, a sadhvi could be raised to the status of an acharya after fifty long years following her entry into mendicancy, while munis would require only five years for promotion to the same rank. In practical terms, the very suggestion of a female acharya appears unthinkable even to a large number of sadhvis. Murtipujak sadhvis defended the male monopoly over acharyaship to a great extent through recourse to arguments that were reminiscent of the gynophobia of the early Jain writers. A woman’s nature (swabhava), in their view, and echoing the early Jain writers, is characterized by frivolity, shallowness and weakness; her physiology, in the main her “weak bones” and “monthly periods” obstructs her from engaging in lengthy philosophical and theological debates that are obligatory for an ascetic of that rank. Monastic codes do

73 Balbir, op. cit., p. 86.
74 N. Shanta, The Unknown Pilgrims, op. cit., p. 418.
75 See Chapter III.
76 Sumati sri, Dinmani sri, Prafullprabha sri, Shrutasrshita sri and many other sadhvis vehemently linked a woman’s physical capacities to her spiritual capacities.
not permit female mendicants to interact with men through the night, as debates often tend to last through nights. Moreover, the prohibition on nuns to undertake study of some important texts such as Mahaparfjina, Arunopapata and Drishtivada), incapacitates them from participating in theological and philosophical debates fully.

A number of sadhvis argue that male and female orders are parallel organizations, with the rank of acharya among munis equivalent to the rank of mahattara or pravarttini among sadhvis. Yet, the relations between the male and female orders, and indeed that between acharya and pravarttini, could be more appositely described as that of super-ordination and subordination than that of equivalence. Pravarttinis are subject to the authority of the acharyas, the latter being consulted on all matters relating to vibara and chaturmas. This dispossession is compounded by the fact that the highest posts among female orders may lie vacant for years. Contrary to Shanta's report that the title of pravarttini has been formally abolished among the Sthanakvasis, Sthanakvasi nuns interviewed complained that no sadhvi has been appointed to the post of pravarttini in Northern India for the past 50 years despite appeals and petitions to the acharyas and elders. This has led to the consolidation of administrative powers within the male orders, which are highly organized with all the requisite ranks of uppravartaka, acharya and pravartaka filled up.

Even with the appointment of a chief nun, as in the case of the Terapanthis, responsible for the spiritual guidance and welfare of sadhvis and female novices, does not diminish the fact that the ultimate jurisdiction over the sadhvi order is not

77 Based on interview with Suvriti sri, Rohini, Delhi.
80 Interview with Kusumlata ji, Jain Girls School, Gurgaon.
that of the chief nun but the acharya, whose decisions she communicates and executes. Indeed, the sadhvi pramukh’s position is subordinate to ganadhipati (the retired acharya) and yuvacharya (the heir designate) too; her status can be compared to that of mahashramana, head of the munis. As Subhasha ji, one Sthanakvasi sadhvi noted, that though chief nuns could be found historically, their authority was restricted to the female orders and never extended to the munis. Conversely, the acharyas have always exercised their power and authority over the whole of mendicant community, including both nuns and monks. This pattern is also reiterated by the fact that even though sadhvis are initiated under a female preceptor, her status is that of the guruni; it is the acharya whom they consider their ultimate spiritual master, their guru. Here, we argue, extending Cort’s argument that the internal divisions of Jain monasticism reflect not simply caste and kinship organization, but also that monastic hierarchy is structured through the gendered ideology of domesticity, with the patriarchal authority, consolidated in the figure of the acharya/gacchadhipati, presiding over the parivar, gacch, sampradaya and sangha. Acharya, being the central figure of authority and a fount of charisma, is the object of nuns’ loyalty and devotion.

There are two exceptional mendicant groups which have broken the taboo surrounding female acharyas by appointing sadhvis to these posts in their samudayās. The credit for this goes to two iconoclastic munis, Muni Sushil and Amar Muni, who broke away from the Sthanakvasi mainstream to set up respectively the Arhat Sangh—besides the Mahavira Jain Mission and later, Siddhachallam, the first asrama

81 Sthanakvasi sadhvis in Delhi were critical of the gendered nomenclature: “A teacher is a teacher. How can you differentiate them on the basis of their gender?”
for monks and nuns in the West—and Viraytan (Rajgir, Bihar) in the late 1970s. Both Muni Sushil (d. 1994) and Amar Muni (d. 1992) were succeeded by female renouncers, rather than male mendicants. Sadhvi Chandana ji, Amar Muni’s disciple became possibly the first woman acharya in recorded Jain history, followed closely by Acharya Dr. Sadhna, the Arhat Sangh’s first woman renouncer. As leaders of the missions set up by their gurus, these female acharyas travel extensively overseas to cater to the spiritual needs of the Jain diaspora, raise funds to run the numerous charities their organizations undertake and supervise their numerous socio-religious activities. Chandana ji and Dr. Sadhna remain two isolated examples, not emulated or replicated in other samudgayas.

Gender inequality in Jain monasticism can also be discerned in a wide array of practices. For instance, in the presence of munis, sadhvis are sometimes asked to sit either on the floor, or on a *pata* (a low wooden seat), which is specifically of a height lower than that on which munis are seated. Sadhvis can also be pressed into providing for domestic services for the munis. In an article, for instance, a leading sadhvi has censured the performance of menial tasks—such as washing clothes, collecting *gothari*, boiling drinking water—by sadhvis in the service of male renouncers. Among the Terapanthis, nuns and monks are expected to contribute something tangible to the *sangha*, in return of which they gain rewards from the acharya: while nuns are assigned tasks such as fashioning bowls (*patras*), brooms

---

82 Conversation with Mahasati Kesar Devi, Jain Vir Nagar, Delhi.
(rajoharana) and mouthshields (muhpatiti), the more ‘intellectual’ tasks of transcribing lectures and translating texts and scriptures are considered a monk’s domain.\(^{84}\)

The most visible condensing of such gender bias against sadhvis is to be found in the practice of *vandana vyavahara* (the practice of salutations). As the exemplars of the Jain ‘path of purification’ and as teachers of Jain doctrine in the present age, mendicants are the objects of ritual salutation, next only in status to tirthankaras and kevalins. The lay community performs *vandana* to mendicants, as do junior mendicants to seniors. This practice best represents the disparity in the status of nuns and monks among the Jains. Traditionally, even among many Shvetambar sects, these reverential greetings are only directed towards munis, though in some reformed sects, lay Jains perform the same *vandana* for both sadhus and sadhvis. In all communities however, sadhvis are expected to offer veneration to sadhus, with the latter never bowing to or greeting sadhvis. At the heart of this differential *vandana vyavahara* lies the suggestion that interactions in the spiritual realm be governed by relationships of the *samsara*, where man predominates and the female is subordinate. Thus we find the rule that requires all sadhvis, even one who has been initiated for a hundred years, to offer *vandana* to all sadhus, even to one who may have been initiated just a day ago.

**Conclusion:**

The above detailed concerns could be summarized as following: First, the Jains accept a marked distinction between renouncers and householders; however, in the following pages, we test Dumont’s insistence upon these as watertight categories to examine the inter-linkages between the two. Second, asceticism does not imply an

automatic repudiation of worldly norms since we see female orders operating according to the principles of hierarchy that are borrowed from norms operative in the *samsāric* domain.

Scholars writing from a gendered perspective have opened up rich avenues of studies and many of these contentions—'women in women out', continuities and ruptures between *grihastha* women and sadhvis—will be the subject of investigation in the following chapters.