Chapter III. Nuns and Temptresses: Representing Women in Jainism

Introduction:

This chapter examines the representations of women within Jainism in order to explore the extent to which they rupture or correspond to the ideals of womanhood purveyed by orthodox Brahmanism. In the last chapter we noted that renunciant discourses are often gendered in such a way as to disempower and exclude women from the project of salvation. Jainism with its recognition of female soteriological agency, one would assume, offers radically different normative models of womanhood—models that would stress women’s independent spiritual quests and capacities. As we shall see, there is no single archetype but a heterogeneity of ideals that appear sometimes to buttress women’s claim to independent spiritual life, and at other times to erode this pursuit. This chapter will survey early monastic codebooks, interrogate popular stories and other Jain literature in an attempt to unpack the construction of gender and sexuality. This heavily influenced the ideas of women’s capability for renunciation.

Cult of the Female Goddesses:

Theoretically, the Jinas or tirthankaras are beyond the pale of human world and have developed a decided disinterest in the workings of samsara. Followers of Jinas, therefore, cannot call upon them for intervention and assistance in their worldly affairs.¹ This task falls upon a plethora of mother goddesses. Central to lay Jain devotional practices, and rampantly depicted in Jain iconography, Jain goddesses are

¹ Jain religious practices are however more complicated than this. John Cort’s work on Jain devotional practices make us sensitive to the presence of Jina bhakti where followers may in fact seek the divine grace of Jinas. John E. Cort, “Jainism as a Bhakti Religion”, Lecture delivered at Centre for the Study of Comparative Religions and Civilizations, Jamia Millia Islamia, 31st March 2008.
categorized into three kinds: those residing in the upper realm (*urdhvaloka*), middle realm (*madhyaloka*) and the lower realm (*adholoka*). In the upper realm are goddesses such as Sarasvati and Lakshmi who have clear Vedic affinities; the undifferentiated Tantrik *vidyadevis* belong to the *madhyaloka*. Described in early texts as occult powers gained through *sadhna*, by circa A.D 5th-7th, *vidyas* (or *vidyadevis*) come to be established as goddesses. Eventually, the number of *vidyadevis* came to be fixed as 16 in both Shvetambar and Digambar traditions. The most important of all goddesses, *yakshis* are to be found in the lower realm, the *adholoka*. *Yakshis*, also called *shasandevatas*, are the attendant deities of various tirthankaras or sites associated with them or other liberated beings such as Bahubali in Sravan Belgola in Karnataka. While some *yakshis* remained minor figures in Jain devotional practices, at least three goddesses, Padmavati, Charkesvari and Ambika command independent cults. Indeed, Padmavati's temple at the Lal Digambar temple complex in Old Delhi is the largest devotee puller, as crowds throng to have a *darshana* of Padmavati.

These goddesses are invoked to intercede in human affairs, and indeed, texts and inscriptions suggest that they were called upon to aid a king's victory in battle, a monk's success in theological debate, and settle disputes.²

**Narratives about Chaste Jain Woman:**

The tradition of sati narratives is a thriving one in Jainism. These are popular stories about chaste women and the miraculous powers their chastity grants them. Fohr argues that in Hinduism, the image of woman first and foremost as a temptress (rather than a soteriological agent) impeded the attraction of Hindu women to a life

of mendicancy. On the other hand, she claims, the representation of women as satis or chaste women, capable of a life of renunciation, facilitated the entry of Jain women into its monastic orders. Fohr also cites the popular circulation of sati narratives as evidence of the Jain conception of the feminine as essentially chaste. Jain tradition recognizes 16 mahasatis (great satis), whose lives and deeds are recorded in the canonical texts, later commentaries and popular biographical tales. Their biographies document the transition from pious laywomen to nuns. The most popular sati narratives are the stories of sati Rajimati and Chandanbala (the first head of the nuns’ order during Mahavira’s time). Many nuns and laywomen repeated these stories to me as ideals of Jain female chastity. These are also the subjects of popular drama performances during Jain festivals or chaturmas.

The life of Chandanbala:

Without doubt, the most feted of all Jain female renouncer figures is Chandanbala, the first woman to take ordination under Mahavira. She is seen by nuns and laity alike as a model of renunciation; her extraordinary life worthy of popular propagation. Hers is a story that is widely known among ordinary Jains, and her trials and tribulations are the stuff of popular drama performances and Jain storybooks.

Chandanbala was born in the royal family of Champa. Her mother, Queen Dharani, was a pious Jain laywoman, devoted to scholarship and religion and bequeathed the

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4 The 16 mahasatis are: Brahmi, Sundari, Chandanbala, Rajimati, Draupadi, Kausalya, Mrgvati, Sulasa, Sita, Damyanti, Sivadevi, Kunti, Subhadra, Chelana, Prabhavati and Padmavati. See Balbir, “Women in Jainism,” op. cit., p. 82.
same values to her daughter. Chandanbala convinced her parents to allow her to devote her life to the high ideals and remain unmarried. So passed their life peacefully till one day, Champa was attacked and vanquished by the army of Kaushambi. The Princess was sold off as a slave but saved by Dhanavah, a virtuous trader. Dhanavah’s fatherly affection for Chandanbala was misunderstood by his wife, who exploiting Dhanavah’s absence one day, cut her beautiful, long hair, chained her legs, and locked her in an underground cell for three days without food and water. On his return, Dhanavah was horrified to learn of his adopted daughter's condition. On finding only boiled lentils, kept for feeding animals, in the house, he plied Chandanbala with it. Meanwhile, he sent for an ironsmith to break the cuffs. Fortuitously, Lord Mahavira was passing that way, having taken a particularly harsh vow for breaking his fast. He had undertaken to accept only boiled lentils from the hands of one who was once a royal, but now a slave; whose hair was shorn and feet chained, and who had fasted for three days. For five months and 25 days, he had roamed finding no suitable candidate at whose hands he could accept food. As he came upon Chandanbala, her chains broke and her hair re-grew, as if by their own volition. Chandanbala, finally broke Mahavira’s fast by offering him food. His sermons moved her to renounce samsara and take ordination under him. Eventually, she headed the sadhvi sangha of 36,000 sadhvis.

Though I had heard the story many times, I realised the full force of its moral and emotional content while watching Bharati sri, a Sthanakvasi sadhvi, direct children in a play based on Chandanbala life. Bharati sri’s hands would go up to her ears in horror when the little girl playing Chandanbala was enacting the scenes in which she is being sold to a prostitute or when she is being tortured by the trader’s wife. “How
our satis suffered to preserve their vows! Oh, how they had to endure! They were no ordinary women,” she would tell me repeatedly.

The Story of Rajimati:

Rajimati, the wife of the tirthankara Neminath, was passing through a dense forest on way to Girnar Mountain when it began to rain. She took refuge in a cave not knowing that her brother-in-law, monk Rathanemi was meditating there. She took off her clothes to dry. Seeing her thus in a naked state, he was sexually aroused and propositioned her. Upon realizing his presence and intentions, she tried to dissuade him by reminding him that his brother had forsaken her. “I am akin to vomit, how can you ingest something that has been vomited. You have reached an exalted state, please exercise control”, she urged him. Rajimati’s admonishment brought Rathanemi to his senses. Both practiced severe austerities and eventually attained liberation.

Thus it is the chaste and virtuous Rajimati who prevents the moral downfall and spiritual degradation of a monk. It is she who through her active intervention becomes, really, the agent of her own and Rathanemi’s enlightenment and moksha. Indeed, this is how most Jains also interpret and present it in various dramatized versions.

However, at least in one instance, I found a radically different interpretation of the sati Rajimati narrative. Sadhvi Prafullprabha of the Tapa Gacch deployed this story to substantiate her claim of women’s innate and out-of-control sexuality and fickle nature. This came up during a discussion on patriarchal references to women found in some texts. Prafullprabha defended such allusions to women insisting that women
being more fickle minded and coquettish required greater discipline and control. Only occasionally were women like Rajimati able to exercise control over their sexual urges, she maintained. When I argued that Rajimati's story indicated the inability of men, rather than women, to control their sexual desires, Prafullprabha's response was to ask me in turn: “but who was responsible for provoking his sexual desires?”

It was the sight of Rajimati's naked body that provoked Rathanemi to be aroused. Rajimati became the nimitta (the express cause) of Rathanemi's arousal, as indeed are all women potentially nimitta for men's spiritual downfall. Thus we see that even sati narratives glorifying the virtuous woman have the possibility of being harnessed in service of creating and constructing an alternative and patently negative view about women.

**Mothers and Virtuous Wives:**

Virtuous as the Jain satis are clearly accepted by Jains to be, “their lives are not chosen ... as models for the lives of the laywomen in their families”\(^5\) This is because the Jain sati narratives usually conclude with these glorified women becoming nuns; the tension between the demands of the family and the draw of the faith is resolved in favour of the woman renouncing the obligations of kin and family. This renders sati narratives as inappropriate models of emulation for laywomen, who must above all uphold the values and honour of the family, in preference over an independent spiritual pursuit. This tension is resolved in a very different way in the numerous stories that appear in Jain magazines, journals and festschrifts honouring senior nuns. These are stories occasionally written by nuns, laywomen or even men. Several of

these deal with women who are pious Jains, whose piety and devotion is tested by opposition from affinal kin. The female protagonist engages in prolonged fasting, worshiping and even undertakes pilgrimages. This is resisted by the affines because there is a clear competition between her devotion to religious practices and her duties towards her husband and his family. Although these stories are also narratives of glorification they do not conclude with the woman turning a renouncer; rather the resolution is mediated through the transformation of the family. The steadfastness of her devotion, what Kelting calls "self-focused religiosity," forces the affinal family to realize her virtues and participate in her piety. In resolving the conflict in a manner that preserves the priority of household and family without abandoning the ideal of a pious Jain woman, these stories approximate the Hindu tradition of satimata rather than the Jain sati narratives.

The most exalted model of womanly and wifely conduct is Mayna Sundari. Mayna was a princess deeply committed to Jain values. Devoted to the Jain goddess Charkeshvari, she performed severe austerities and undertook all rituals prescribed for pious Jains. This irked the King, her father. In order to teach her a lesson, he married her off to a leper, Shripal, challenging her to cure her husband's leprosy through recourse to her austerities and devotion. Unperturbed, she instructed her husband in the teachings of Jain faith, converting him into a devout Jain. As a result of their joint devotion to the goddess Charkeshvari and rigorous fasts, her husband was miraculously cured and they became prosperous. Mayna Sundari and her husband have attained the status of exemplary Jain married couple: her virtuosity is commemorated in the navpada oli (nine-day) fasts undertaken by women for the well-

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*See Chapter II for jivit satimata.*
being and felicity of their husband and family. She is the ideal Jain pativrata, a virtuous wife and a Jain evangelist.7

In women’s telling of the story, Mayna Sundari is placed at the centre, while her husband Shripal is cast as a supporting character. This is how several nuns narrated the story to me. In contrast, many versions committed to writing push Mayna Sundari to the margins, rendering it as the story of King Shripal, who was cured of leprosy by his wife’s devoutness.8 Furthermore, in this story, she is even denied any religious agency: the ayambila fasts she undertakes are at the instructions of an acharya; even the siddhachakra9 she worships has been devised by the acharya. The edge of her ‘self-focused religiosity’ has been blunted and domesticated completely.

Gold, in her study of devotional Rajasthani songs and stories, has noted a striking difference in the way men and women narrate stories about independent women. Jungli Rani, who gains divine favours through her devotion, is cast as a dangerous and evil character in the popular renderings. When women recount this tale on the day of sun worship, she is depicted as a much-misunderstood woman, who is finally accepted on her terms. In other tellings, however, a grimmer fate awaits her: she is turned variously into a gold statue or even killed. Elsewhere, Ramanujan has argued

7 Tapa Gacch sadhvi Sayamratna sri rued that in the present age, women were no longer emulating Mayna Sundari. She cited the example of a Jain woman in the locality sadhvis were staying, who had re-married following the death of her first husband.
9 It is a diagram of nine petals, representing the five supreme lords of Jainism: The Jina, siddha, acharya, upadhyaya, and sadhu, the three jewels and asceticism. As representative of Jain soteriology, siddhachakra is an object of devotion.
that women often tell their own lived realities through these stories. Storytelling thus becomes and act invested with their agency.¹⁰

It is interesting to note that no sadhvi I met cited the 19th tirthankara Malli Devi as a role model for Jain women, lesser so for Jain female mendicants. While the Digambar nuns of course outrightly denied the possibility of a female tirthankara, even the Shvetambar sadhvis deemed her presence in the tirthankara pantheon as “an exception and a wonderment” (ashcharya¹¹), “a rare occurrence”, likely to be never repeated again. The most alluded to role models were the mothers of the tirthankaras, who raised their sons to be world renouncers. Sadhvi after sadhvi deployed the mothers of tirthankaras, especially Maru Devi¹² and Trishala¹³ to counter the negative depictions of women in Jain texts. These women had proved, in the view of many sadhvis, that women were the real sources of greatness in this world. Only that their greatness may derive not necessarily in seeking salvation for their own selves, but in acting as spiritual guides for their sons. The feminine quality of nurture was the most easily acceptable ideal of a good Jain woman.

There are thus obvious limits to the independent course that women may be allowed to chart: the obligations of kin and family demand that female spiritual virtuosos are not privileged as the sole models for Jain womanhood. Examples of chaste and virtuous wives who preserve the agnatic code of honour are just as replete. These women embody a religiosity that does not conflict with familial and domestic duties.

¹¹ In discussion with Sthanakvasi sadhvis at Jain Vir Nagar Colony, Delhi.
¹² Mother of Rishabha, the first tirthankara. She is believed by the Shvetambaras to be the first person in the current cycle to have attained liberation.
¹³ Mahavira’s mother.
Furthermore, the stereotype of woman-as-temptress is not altogether missing, as is evident, from the numerous warnings issued to monks. The debate on strimoksha also serves to define women as sites of shame, desire and violence, rendering them antithetical to the project of renunciation.

**Ascetic Rules:**

There are exhaustive rules guiding the ascetics about their conduct in a variety of situations: from the everyday mundane part of an ascetic’s existence—such as begging for clothes and food, to the extraordinary, such as the ideal mendicant conduct when confronted by ruffians while crossing a river by boat (the mendicant is expected to leap off the boat while remaining unruffled). These rules are to be found in its corpus of monastic codebooks such as *Acharanga Sutra*, *Uttaradhyayana*, and *Sutrakritanga*. Most of the injunctions, by beginning with “a monk or a nun should” or “a monk or a nun should not” recognize the existence and centrality of nuns in the monastic order. In Book II of the *Acharanga Sutra*, the foremost book of mendicant conduct, we find numerous strictures that are aimed at segregating and protecting mendicants from the temptations that define a householder’s existence.

Being itinerant, monks and nuns had to perforce seek residence in a shravak’s home to spend the night. There were only certain kinds of lodgings that mendicants were allowed, others such as the one described below were to be avoided by the conscientious mendicant:

_A monk or a nun_ [Emphasis added] should not use for religious postures... a lodging where the householder or his wife ...rub or anoint each other’s body with oil or ghee or butter or butter or grease; for it is not fit....” Similarly, “_a monk or a nun_ [Emphasis added]
should not use for religious postures... a lodging where the householder or his wife... rub or shampoo each other's body with perfumes, ground drugs, powder, lodhra ... for it is not fit.¹⁴

Similarly, a monk or nun is also prohibited from taking refuge in a lodging where the householder or his wife clean, wash, or sprinkle each other's body with hot or cold water.¹⁵ The spiritual equivalence of nuns and monks is recognized in these books of discipline by the manner in which both nuns and monks are equal recipients of disciplinary directives.

Re-looking at the Ascetic Codes:

All mendicants, irrespective of their gender, are expected to remain scrupulously loyal to pancha mahavrata or the five great vows, which are undertaken at the time of diksha. These five vows are: abhimsa (vow of absolute non-violence); satya (vow of absolute truthfulness); astrya (vow of absolute non-stealing); brahmacharya (vow of absolute celibacy) and aparigraha (vow of absolute non-attachment and non-possession).

Even though there is no explicit difference in the rules prescribed for nuns and monks—both nuns and monks are expected to follow the vows of non-violence, truth, non-stealing, celibacy and non-possession—there are enough hints that, when it comes to warning the mendicants to adhere to the vow of absolute celibacy, the

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rules appear to be primarily addressing men. Examine for instance the vow of 
brahmacharya, which enjoins the ascetics hence:

I renounce all sexual pleasures, either with gods or
men or animals. I shall not give way to sensuality and
...exempt myself.

It lays down five clauses to this great vow:

The first clause runs thus:

A Nirgrantha does not continually discuss topics
relating to women. The Kevalin says: If a Nirgrantha
discusses such topics, he might fall from the law
declared by the Kevalin, because of the destruction or
disturbance of his peace...

Now follows the second clause:

A Nirgrantha does not regard the lovely forms of
women. The Kevalin says: If a Nirgrantha regards the
lovely forms of women, he might fall ...

Now follows the third clause:

A Nirgrantha does not recall to his mind the pleasures
and amusements he formerly had with women. The
Kevalin says: If a Nirgrantha recalls to his mind the
pleasures and amusements he formerly had with
women, he might fall...

The fourth clause exhorts the following:

A Nirgrantha does not eat and drink too much, nor
does he drink liquors or eat highly seasoned dishes.
The Kevalin says: If a Nirgrantha did eat and drink
too much, or did drink liquors and eat highly seasoned dishes, he might fall...

This is the fifth clause:

A Nirgrantha does not occupy a bed or couch affected by women [Emphases added], animals or eunuchs. The Kevalin says: If a Nirgrantha did occupy a bed or couch affected by women, animals, or eunuchs, he might... 16

Masculinizing Renunciation:

Elsewhere, Acharanga Sutra warns monks of the dangers—and the ever-possible fall into the cesspool of sin—that lurk in a householder's lodgings where women reside in the following lines:

While the mendicant lives together with the householders, he might see the householder's earrings or girdle or jewels or pearls or gold or silver or bracelets...or necklaces (those consisting of three strings, or those reaching halfway down the body...) or decked or ornamented girl or maiden. Thus the mendicant might direct his mind to approval or dislike: 'Let her be thus;' or, 'Let her not be thus.' So he might say, so he might think.

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This is (another reason): While a mendicant lives together with householders, the householder's wives, daughters, daughters-in-law, nurses, slave-girls or servant-girls might say: 'These reverend Sramanas... have ceased from sexual intercourse; it behooves

them not to indulge in sexual intercourse: whatever woman indulges with them in sexual intercourse, will have a strong powerful, illustrious, glorious victorious son of heavenly beauty.' Hearing and perceiving such talk, one might induce the mendicant to indulge in sexual intercourse.

Hence it has been, said to the mendicant that he should not use for religious postures... a lodging used by the householder. 17

The above passage throws open several questions. The most obvious being that contrary to the earlier cited rules of conduct that address both the male and female mendicants by specifically evoking the terms, "monks and nuns", this one is conspicuously directed to the more general ‘mendicant’. However it quickly fixes the gender of this generic mendicant by making references to the “decked or ornamented girl or maiden” whom the mendicant is strictly debarred from devoting any thoughts to. Moreover, the desire of the women of the household to mate with the one who has "ceased from sexual intercourse" tends to characterize asceticism in terms of semen retention, its glorification in terms of the power of his stored seed, which when released would spell not only the end of his mendicant vows but also produce a son of unparalleled beauty and vigour. Here, we are reminded of Burghart’s model ascetic who pays off the debts to his ancestors through retention of semen. 18

What it achieves, above all, is a reversion to the script made familiar to us in the practice of orthodox Hindu asceticism, with its recognizable cast of the male ascetic and the female temptress. From the lady of the house to the lowliest slave-girl, each one stands as a potential cause for the downfall of the mendicant by causing him to break his vows, either in thoughts—by thinking of the bedecked maidens; or in deeds—by being induced into sexual intercourse. By bedecking herself with ornaments, a woman is not deliberately seeking the mendicant’s attention; however by contriving to beget a son by him, she comes to be invested with sexual agency. Whether or not she is plotting to seduce the monk, it is clear that women, especially the women of the household, are best avoided by monks to preserve their vows and to circumvent their descent into sinfulness.

Men as Mendicants / Women as Temptresses:

This theme gets an even more elaborate treatment in some other texts: The Sutrakritanga (the second anga or limb of the Jaina canon) and the Uttaradhyayana (the second Mulasutra text). Dealing with a variety of subjects, both works act really as guides for young initiates, instructing them in true Jain doctrine, the correct path to the highest good, the principle duties of a monk, but above all, the dangers that punctuate a monk’s spiritual life.

Lecture XXXII of Uttaradhyayana Sutra titled the “Causes of Carelessness” recalls some of the sanctions we came across in Acharanga Sutra:

A Sramana engaged in penance, should not allow himself to watch the shape, beauty, coquetry,
laughter, prattle, gestures, and glances of women, nor retain a recollection of them in his mind.  

And soon enough, the feminine comes to be identified as one of the prime causes of carelessness—and the principal source of danger—in a monk’s spiritual career. Attachment to women, decrees Uttaradhyayana Sutra, is the most difficult to surmount and those who have achieved this will find it simple to sever their affections to other ties and pleasures. Forbearance and indifference to womanhood is the mark of a true monk—“those who possess the three guptis cannot be disturbed even by well-adorned goddesses.” Yet the wholesome way for a monk is still to live alone, especially sheltered from the female presence because “it is not safe for mice to live near the dwelling of a cat....” Thus the threat to the monk’s chastity and ascetic vows derives not merely from his own lack of control and continued attachment to the pleasures a woman affords—which even though extremely arduous, he is capable of perfecting and exercising—but from the cat-like predatory female who presents an unrelenting drag on his spiritual pursuits.

The Sutrakritanga Sutra devotes an entire chapter to the “Knowledge of Women”. Its principal intent is to familiarize and caution the monks about the ways of the women, their seductive tricks, their fickle nature and the terrible consequences that befall those who give in to this temptation. Part I is aptly titled, “How Women Tempt a Monk”. Here the monk is upgraded from the status of a mouse to that of a fearless single lion. The woman though remains the entrapper who ensnares the

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20 “As it is not safe for mice to live near the dwelling of a cat, so a chaste (monk) cannot stay in a house inhabited by women.” Uttaradhyayana, Lecture XXXII, ibid.
monk/lion with a piece of flesh. The 'flesh' here is not simply allegorical, for it is her physical flesh that tempts the ascetic and misleads him from his true path. Subsequent passages regard the monk variously as an antelope, a man who drinks poisoned milk, a pot filled with lac, and the woman as hunter, poison, thorn and fire (which causes the pot of lac to melt).

A woman is defined simultaneously by stupidity and caprice: "with clever pretences women make up to him, however foolish they be; they know how to contrive that some monks will become intimate with them." Pretending to be pious, women will, the monks are warned, attempt to lure them by beseeching them to accept a robe, an alms bowl, food or drink from them, or even by pleading the monks to teach them the law of asceticism, as if they wish to give up their current way of life. However a monk should never trust a woman because "one man [women] have in their heart, another in their words, and another still in their actions."

Such views are also echoed by many contemporary sadhvis too. While narrating the story of a legendary monk, Sadhvi Prafullprabha endorses the view that women are by nature fickle minded and bearers of unbridled sexuality.

Sthulbhadra Muni lived with a prostitute for twelve years. But later, he was transformed and thought that he should convert the prostitute into a pious shravika. When he returned to her [with this aim], the prostitute thought that he had come back

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22 *ibid.*
23 "A young woman, putting on fine ornaments and clothes, will say to a Sramana: 'I shall give up (my former way of life) and practice the rough (viz., control). Reverend Sir, teach me the Law!'" *ibid*, p.274.
24 *ibid.*
to her for pleasure. Upon seeing him in muni vesh, she exclaimed that he, who used to look like a prince earlier, resembled a beggar now. The Muni replied that he had renounced the world and become a Jain sadhu. The prostitute mocked at him and challenged him to observe his chaturmas in her pleasure palace. So the great Muni spent his rainy retreat in her house, which had erotic pictures painted on its walls. The prostitute danced before him and tried to ply him with rich foods. But he remained utterly unmoved. His was only one aim—that of converting the prostitute to a shrawika, to bring her to the true path. And finally he succeeded. His absolute control and discipline convinced the prostitute.

Sthulbhadrā's guru had four disciples: one spent his chaturmas at the edge of a lion's den; another near a snake's pit; the third on the periphery of a well. But upon hearing them all, the Guru declared that Sthulbhadrā's had been the most severe because he had won over the woman. So if one sees, all of these were very dangerous but Sthulbhadrā had passed the most difficult test. Even great munis can fall from their greatness [because of women].

The Nun as a Sexual Agent:

The complete absence of nuns in these strictures is quite conspicuous. Should we assume that the early Jain texts believed that nuns were capable of exercising self-restraint or were asexual beings not requiring the same degree of discipline that was being enjoined upon the monks? Or should we draw a different conclusion: that notwithstanding the ostensible equal attention to both nuns and monks in laying down the rules governing their conduct, Jain texts were still unable to fully abandon

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25 Interview with Tapa Gacch sadhvi, Prafullprabha at Atmanand Jain Sabha, Delhi.
the norms of the surrounding culture, which characterized renunciation as exclusively male. Falk in her study of the Buddhist nun orders attributes the decline of female orders in Buddhism to precisely this reason. She has argued that Buddhism was unable to shake off the patriarchal norms of Hinduism, even while offering a radically different ideology of women's equal spiritual entitlements. It appears that Jainism too, despite recognizing women as equal components of the Jain spiritual world, both as _shravikas_ and _sadhvis_, could not wrench free from the tendency to portray renunciation as an essentially male pursuit. Thus we see many of its monastic codes inadvertently erase away the presence of its female practitioners. Their role then reduced to being mere impediments in the path of this essentially male quest for salvation.

One direct consequence of characterizing the feminine as inherently sexual—inimical rather than amenable to the path of renunciation—was that even those women who were engaged in the pursuit of liberation were invested with a sexual agency. Their ability to renounce sex and remain steadfast to the vow of celibacy was rendered suspect. If, in the earlier texts, the nuns are effaced from discussions on celibacy, many post-canonical texts, including among others _Brihatkalpa Sutra, Brihatkalpabhasya, Nisbitha Churni_ and _Avashyaka Niryukti_ developed specific rules for female mendicants in great detail. Writers have noted that in its early phase, Jainism like other _shramanic_ religions, defended egalitarian attitudes towards women, many of its later texts and commentaries developed a panoply of stringent rules for female mendicants. These were geared towards maintaining a strict control over the nuns' conduct, especially sexual conduct. _Brihatkalpa Sutra_ for instance, forbids a _sadhvi_ from venturing out of the _upashraya_ on her own, unaccompanied, for the purpose of
gochari (alms), food or toilet. Further, it prescribes eleven kinds of clothes for the nun, and all of which must be worn while the nuns are travelling. This reflects the need to protect nuns from the imminent threat of sexual assault they might face while travelling.

But these are relatively mild when compared to what the Brihatkalpabhaitya prescribes. This text prohibits the nuns from keeping in their possession or using all those fruits and vegetables, which had elongated or oblong shapes. Similarly, objects with handles and knobs were banned for nuns. These objects were taboo on account of their similarity in shape to the male organ. It was believed that the sight of these fruits and objects would stir sexual desires in nuns and that they could be deployed for gaining sexual pleasures. Further, nuns were strictly warned that they should repudiate any pleasure arising from the accidental touch of an animal, and refrain from masturbation under all circumstances. Indeed, strict penalties have been stipulated for any infraction.

It was the opinion of the writers of these texts, that for many women, asceticism was a refuge from the problems of life and not driven by purely spiritual aspirations. These women could not embrace a life of renunciation, nor follow the five mahavratas it entailed, in any genuine manner. They continued to hanker after worldly pleasures, including sexual pleasure, necessitating a strict regime of control.

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27 ibid., 108.
There is a perceptible difference in the kind of strictures pertaining to celibacy that are issued to the male and female mendicants. The strictures to monks lie more in the domain of cautions and warnings: portents really of the depths to which a monk may sink if he fails to solidly defend his vow of *brahmacharya*. His portrayal approximates that of a victim who needs to continuously guard his chastity from women.

A nun however needs to be protected both from potential molesters and rapists as well as her own self. There are no stories that gently mock her possible spiritual degradation; neither fables lampooning the chains of domesticity that might bind her. Instead we have a harsh indictment of the feminine itself.

**Manly Restraint and Womanly Sensuality: The Female in Jain Narrative Literature**

Jains are known as the principal storytellers of India. Their narrative literature straddles the genres of *katha, charitas, prabhandas* or universal histories. These have been the primary vehicles of disseminating the Jain values of asceticism, of defining the normative models of conduct and socially accepted behaviour. There is, expectedly, a great deal of overlap between these genres, as when a biography of an illustrious Jain mendicant is told as a tale, or incorporated into a story, in order to expound a Jain moral or to explicate the obligatory rituals to be performed by ascetics or lay people.

Several themes outlined in the rulebooks of the Jain ascetics—virulent female sexuality, their beguiling and fickle nature, the necessity of equanimity even in face of temptation, but above all, the paramount concern with resolving the dilemma of
sensuality and asceticism—surface with amazing frequency in Jain narrative literature.

Of particular interest to us may be a series of polemical stories that appear in Hemachandra's *The Lives of the Jain Elders.* The bulk of the text comprises stories exchanged between Jambu and his eight wives on the night of their wedding, held just a day prior to the embracing of ascetic vows by Jambu. These can be seen as truly emblematic of the way in which Jainism conceives of the conflict between the vows of chastity—the difficulties that lie strewn in the path of remaining loyal to the vow of chastity, but ultimately, the necessity of upholding it as the only true path to final liberation—and sexual desires (which become really the metaphor for all worldly pleasures.). Again, the impulse towards chastity is rendered male through the figure of Jambu while sexual desires are condensed into the figure of female via Jambu's eight wives who tell him stories that extol the virtues of enjoying the pleasures of the flesh and underline the urgency of doing so. Jambu's purpose in narrating these stories is to fob off his wives' overtures by foregrounding the importance of chastity and the terrible consequences that ensue from sexual gratification.

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30 The last person in this time cycle to gain omniscience.

31 Lecture XXXII of *Uttaradhyayana Sutra,* already notes that "to those who have overcome the attachment (to women), all others will offer no difficulties; even as to those who have crossed the great ocean, no river though big like Ganges, (will offer any difficulty)," op. cit., p. 186.
Jambu narrates the story of Vidyunmalin, who comes to earth to gain magic powers along with his brother, Megharatha.\textsuperscript{32} The formula to gain these powers is to cohabit with a woman while preserving one’s chastity. Both soon marry two untouchable girls: one one-eyed and the other buck-toothed. While Megharatha remains steadfast to his vows and becomes a master of magic, Vidyunmalin falls passionately in love with his deformed wife and makes her pregnant. His brother entreats him to leave the community of untouchables since they have now gained the magical powers and will be able to enjoy a “free choice of beautiful goddesses”; Vidyunmalin confesses that he has deviated from the true path and as a result remains deprived of the magical powers. Despite his brother’s appeals, Vidyunmalin begs off saying that he lacks “the moral worth to abandon this pregnant, low-caste woman... I have caused myself to go astray through this lustfulness of mine.”\textsuperscript{33} He promises to master the magic powers within a year. The story then recounts the next two years in the lives of the two brothers: while Megharatha, deploying his powers lives in a palatial house and enjoys all the good things of life, Vidyunmalin wallowing in the gutter of passion for his ugly wife becomes a slave to her wishes and that of her family and a nurse to their son.

“The Story of Vidyunmalin’ appears to be a dramatization of the various rules of chaste conduct and the consequences of breaking those.”\textsuperscript{34} There is a difference though. Here, the woman lacks sexual agency (she is never depicted as ensnaring the man); and she is characterized in singularly repugnant terms (deformed, buck-


\textsuperscript{33} Recall the passage that warns about the dangers arising from supporting women, \textit{Sutrakritanga Sutra}, op. cit., p. 274.

\textsuperscript{34} Especially, “How they Treat him Afterwards” in \textit{Sutrakritanga Sutra}, Book 1, Lecture 4, Chapter II, \textit{ibid.}, pp. 275-278.
toothed, low-caste), which makes the slavishness of the male even more inexplicable.

It sets up a series of oppositions: Between the two brothers who are the denizens of a mountain place ((Dear-to-the-Sky) and their wives who reside on earth; the brothers' exalted status as master magicians and the girls' low social status as untouchables; Megharatha's steadfastness in his vows and Vidyunmalin's desertion of the same; the celestial beauties at Megharatha's service and the ugly untouchable wife; the heavenly pleasures enjoyed by Megharatha and the degradations suffered by Vidyunmalin. All these oppositions seek to accentuate the virtues of chastity and the dangers that accrue from blind passion. Thus Jambu tells his wives that he shall not emulate Vidyunmalin.

The wives' stories are celebrations of the pleasures of the flesh and caution Jambu against abandoning the delights their bodies offer to him now in pursuit of a distant and unrealizable goal.\(^{35}\) Most remarkable is the 'Story of Nupurapandita and the Jackal'.\(^{36}\) The tale actually comprises of two separate sets of events, propelled by the unchaste actions of two women. It opens with the goldsmith's daughter-in-law, Durgila—"foremost of cunning women, she was an ocean of beauty"\(^{37}\)—bathing in the river. A young handsome man is passing by and the two immediately fall in love,

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\(^{35}\) This is the moral of the story of the monkey couple, for instance, in which the monkeys are magically turned into humans by jumping at a holy spot, whereupon they proceed to indulge in love play. The woman (formerly she-monkey) is contented with her life but the man (the former male monkey) desires a divine status. The woman says: "Let divinity be; our pleasure certainly surpasses divinity, [Emphasis added] that pleasure which we two enjoy, always unseparated, freely and without hindrance." The monkey not heeding the female's pleas jumps at the same spot again in the hope of being elevated to the status of gods. Alas, he resumes the monkey form. The story ends with the woman becoming the queen and the monkey performing at the court. See, "The Story of the Pair of Monkeys", Canto 2 in *The Lives of the Jain Elders*, op.cit., pp. 66-9.


\(^{37}\) *ibid.*, p. 69.
but go their separate ways without meeting that day. While both are pining for each other, the young man enlists the support of a Jain nun—"who was like a family goddess for loose women"—as a messenger. [Emphasis added]. To cut the long story short, the lovers meet in the Ashoka grove behind Durgila's house, but are discovered by the father-in-law who removes her anklet as proof of her nocturnal rendezvous with another man.

Durgila though has noticed this and sets in motion a plan to outwit her father-in-law and to emerge from this with her badge of the chaste wife intact. She hurries her young lover away and returns to her husband's chamber, brings him to the same spot in the Ashoka grove, makes love to him and when he has emerged from his post-coital slumber, complains to him that her father-in-law has removed her anklet while they were asleep. The son confronts and rebukes his father for this act. Durgila then vows to clear her name of this accusation by passing between the legs of the yaksha, who is believed to trap all guilty people between his testicles. As she is proceeding towards the yaksha, her lover—as arranged beforehand—emerges from the crowds and clings to her like a mad man. Durgila beseeches the yaksha that she be trapped between his testicles if she had known the touch of any man other than her husband and this mad man who touched her in the temple. While the yaksha is still contemplating the merit of her arguments, she quickly passes between her legs and is hailed as a chaste wife by all present. "Because she had refuted the stain of dishonour which had come about through the removal of the anklet (nupura), people called her Nupurapandita ('Clever Nupura')."

The wives then narrate the story of an

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38 ibid., p. 71.
39 ibid., p. 76.
adulterous queen. At its conclusion, Jambu’s wife says: “So pay no heed to these parables of persuasion and dissuasion. They’re unsuitable for people like us. Enjoy sensual pleasure!”

Nupurapandita’s tale also makes an appearance in Avashyaka Sutra. The story of the clever adulteress is rather unique in attributing moral dubiousness to a Jain nun (who helps out the young lover in meeting Durgila); but while Hemachandra’s narrative merely portrays her as the patron of “loose women”, in the Avashyaka Sutra story, the indictment is much harsher: the young man solicits the nun’s help through flattery, and concludes, “since the nun bursts out laughing playfully when she is spoken to by handsome youth, surely she goes in search of love while in search of alms.” [Emphasis added].

The climactic story recounted by Jambu decides the argument resolutely in favour of the worthiness of chastity and culminates finally in the undertaking of renunciatory vows not only by Jambu but by his eight wives. It is a chronicle of a lusty and adulterous queen, Lalitanga, who takes a handsome paramour. Their lovemaking is interrupted by the arrival of the suspicious King, whereupon the queen and her servant throw the young man into a cesspit behind the palace for fear of being discovered. There he survives for months like a dog on the remains of the meals thrown by the queen and her maidservant. In the rainy season the palace gutters

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40 ibid., p. 82.
41 Avashyaka Sutra is the repository of obligatory duties to be performed by Jain monks. Commentaries on the Avashyaka Sutra were huge storehouses of kathas, which illustrated the importance of adhering to these essential duties. Nupurapandita’s story appears in Phyllis Granoff (ed.), The Clever Adulteress: A Treasury of Jain Literature (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993). The translation of this story in the anthology is by Nalini Balbir.
42 ibid., p. 21.
flood the hole with water, which carry him into the moat outside. Lying on the banks of the moat unconscious he is discovered by his old nurse, who takes him home to his family who nurse him back to good health. Jambu poses this question to his wives: with his vigour renewed, would the young man return to the queen’s quarters even if she begged him? The wives are unanimous that he would not, and rapidly the matter is settled and they too wish to renounce with him.

What is remarkable about the story is the dark, gynaecological terms in which Jambu lays out the moral of the story of Lalitanga: Lalitanga, revelling in sexual pleasures, represents the embodied soul; the dark hole in which the young man is pushed stands for the womb; the remnants of meal thrown down the cesspit symbolize maternal nurture, the time spent in the hole is equivalent to the foetus’ time in the womb; the man’s expulsion from the hole denotes the developed foetus’ emergence through the vagina; his fall into the moat represents the arrival of the child in the mother’s room, the swooning of the young man at the banks of the moat is comparable to the baby’s swooning when it is freed from its protective membrane of skin and blood, and so on.

It is in this story that we see the gynophobia inherent in other stories and texts reaching its apogee. In a culture where fecundity is celebrated as auspicious, it is quite extraordinary that the process of reproduction and birth is painted in such murky terms so as to inspire renunciation and disgust. Food leftovers, vagina, foetus, the messiness of blood and skin are all guaranteed to evoke loathing for the very process of reproduction—and the female physiology that is its site.
We have just seen how Jain popular stories, didactic tales as well as books of rules could create virulently misogynist cultural roles for women. Jainism negotiated constantly between its legitimation of women as rightful soteriological agents and the impulse to masculinize the practice of renunciation itself. Thus on the one hand, it approved of asceticism as a valid option for women and on the other, implicated women as the very anti-thesis of this path. This ambiguity is most evident in the debates surrounding the possibility of *strinirvana*.

**Linga, Bhava and Moksha:**

From its earliest days, Jainism, being a predominantly monastic religion, was confronted with the question of rightful candidates for entering its monastic orders. Who can be ordained? Who must be prohibited from ordination? How to sift the legitimate aspirants from faux candidates? And even more importantly, which is the correct path of mendicancy: the clothed or the naked? Each of these questions drew into contestation the figure of the woman, her body and sexuality.

Central to this debate was the distinctly Jain conception of gender and sexuality. Despite its heterodox origins and character, Jainism shared certain features with the late Vedic culture, *circa* 8th-6th century B.C, namely the three-fold division of genders into male, female and *napunsaka* (literally not a male). Even in its treatment of the origin, conception and embryology of the three-fold division of sexes, Jainism replicates the view espoused by Ayurveda:

> And again, it has been said of old: a man and a woman combine in cohabitation in a cunnus, which was produced by their *karman*, and there they deposit their humours. Therein are born the souls of different men, viz., of those born in

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or in the minor continents of Aryas and barbarians, as women or men or eunuchs, according to the semen and blood of the mother and the other circumstances (contingent on their coming into existence). These beings at first feed on the menses of the mother and the semen of the father, or both combined into an unclean, foul (substance). And afterwards they absorb with a part (of their bodies) the essence of whatever food the mother takes. Gradually increasing and attaining to the proper dimensions of a foetus they come forth from the womb, some as males, some as females, some as neuters." [Emphases added].

According to the commentator Shilanka, a male will be produced if semen is in excess, a female if the blood, and a neuter if they are equally balanced. Further, a male is produced from the right side of the womb, a female from the left and a neuter from together (that is, centre).

The Jain catalogue of biological genders (draJalinga45) was hardly new: male (pumlinga/purnshalinga), female (strilinga), and neither male nor female, the imprecise (napunsakalinga) on the basis of primary and secondary sexual features.46 Thus a draJapurusha is one who exhibits the external bodily markers such as moustache, beard and the male organ; a draJastri is one who displays such female signs as breasts, vagina, smooth skin and so on; the draJanapunsaka is one who lacks the male and female sexual markers.

45 DraJya implies substance, material or physical features.
46 Jaini, Gender and Salvation, op. cit., p. 11. These lingas were believed to arise from the nama-karma.
Where Jainism differed from other schools of thought was in distinguishing these external, bodily markers from the psychological, internal markers termed bhavalingsa⁴⁷. While bhavalingsa subsumed the psychic characteristics of a sex—for instance, tenderness, timidity and inconstancy as essentially feminine—its bedrock was sexual inclination. In a move that appears designed to be a stinging rebuff to Brahmanical orthodoxy, these psychological sexual orientations at the heart of the Jain conception of sexuality were called veda. Three kinds of libido or vedas were recognized:

a) Striveda: It is the awakening of sexual appetite in the female when she comes into contact with men, or even at the mere sight of men. The striveda has the same effect among women as the predominance of biliousness creates a desire for the sweets. The arousal of this erotic instinct instantaneously debases a woman just as a mild fanning or blowing quickens the fire under ashes into a consuming blaze.

b) Purushaveda: This kind of libido is characterised by sex-passion in males at the sight of, or in the company of, females. This erotic instinct is comparable to the nature of a straw-fire, which dies out after consuming the straws. So too this purushaveda dies out immediately after its temporary ascendance and consummation.

c) Napunsahaveda: More than a discrete sexuality, this type is an accretion and combination of the two earlier types of veda. It arouses in both, the male and the female alike, a desire for sex with their own type. So strong is this urge that it has been likened to the conflagration that reduces the whole town to

⁴⁷ Bhava meaning emotions belong to the psychological realm.
ashes. This suggests that the possessors of the last *veda* are characterized by hyper-sexuality.

Therefore, we may speak of a person as a *bhanapurusha* (psychologically male) if the *pumveda/purushaveda* is aroused in him as a result of his *karmas* and he becomes sexually covetous of a female. Likewise, if the awakening of the *striveda* stokes a person’s passions for a male, then that person may be designated as a *bhavastri*; and finally, the simultaneous desire for both men and women marks the person as *bhanapuniska*.

Even more interestingly, Jains do not insist on a necessary correspondence between *bhanalinta* and *dranyalinta*, i.e., between morphological gender and sexual orientation. It was perfectly possible they argued, for instance, for a woman to experience female, male or third-sex libido, and so also for men and hermaphrodites to experience any of the three libidos.

This double classification along the axes of *dranya* and *bhana* was a unique Jain proposition. It departed drastically from the Brahmanical view which privileged primary and secondary sexual characteristics (that is, the presence or absence of long hair, body hair, breast and vagina) and the ability to conceive and procreate as the determinants of a person’s sexual status. The signal contribution of Jainism in the field of sexuality lay in cleaving the overlap between natural sex, sexual orientation and gender roles; a conception that was unparalleled in any contemporaneous school of thought. 48

48 The implications of such a proposition opened up rich possibilities for the theorization of non-heterosexual behaviour, and allowed for the explanation of homosexuals, bisexuals and
Jain discourse on sexuality was elaborated in the background of practical and theoretical dilemmas that Jainism, with its centrality on monastic orders, countenanced. Since renunciation called for an absolute suppression of libidinal desires, only those who were capable of achieving this could be admitted into this life. Sexually ambiguous personages, particularly, eunuchs and homosexuals were prohibited from taking initiation into the monastic community. Their palpable sexuality ("a village conflagration") rendered them threats to the strict codes of celibacy and posed a constant threat to other mendicants. The question also was if a woman's morphology and psychology (dravyalinga and bhavalinga respectively) were amenable and reconcilable with ascetic ideals, and then ultimately liberation? But given the disjunction between dravyalinga and bhavalinga, there was, in the first place, no consensus on who was to be categorized as a woman, and who a man.

The Debate on Female Renunciation:

This debate raged for a thousand years, wherein both sides laying claim to scriptural authority, empirical observation, linguistic interpretation, and logical reasoning, other sexually ambiguous personages. This theoretical move, argue Zwilling and Sweet, rendered the category of the third-sex into a highly heterogeneous one, inhabited by a motley group of people: eunuchs, homosexuals, bisexuals and so on. (Leonard Zwilling and Michael J. Sweet, "Like a City Ablaze: The Third Sex and the Creation of Sexuality in Jain Religious Tradition", Journal of the History of Sexuality, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1996, p. 377). A spate of recent scholarship on sexuality in traditional India has focused on establishing the indegenity of homosexuality (to counter the charge of it being a Western import). In this endeavour, it has turned to various traditional texts of classical and medieval India, but has largely ignored the Jain tradition. See for example, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (eds.), Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Indian History and Literature (New York: Palgrave, 2001) and Ruth Vanita (ed.), Queering India: Same-sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society, (Delhi: Routledge, 2002). It is Zwilling and Sweet who have persistently focused on third-sex constructs and non-normative sexuality in Jain textual tradition. See also Zwilling and Sweet's, "The Evolution of Third Sex Constructs in Ancient India: A Study in Ambiguity" in Julia Leslie and Mary McGee (eds.), Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 99-132.
produced a huge corpus of literature concerned with the theme. Beginning with Kundakunda, a *circa* A.D. 2nd century Digambar mendicant, it comes to a close in 17th century, with the Shvetambar mendicant Meghavijaya who has in a sense the final word. The following section draws upon the translations and compilation of these texts by P.S. Jaini.

Kundakunda’s *Sutraprabharta* is the first text known that refutes the validity of clothed mendicancy and denies women access to spiritual pursuits on account of the prohibition on female nudity and her specific female biology. Though there is no categorical denial of *strimoksha*, but in disqualifying them from assuming full mendicancy, Kundakunda lent scriptural weight to the argument against women’s salvation.

In the teaching of Jina a person does not attain *moksha* if one wears clothes... Nudity is the path leading to *moksha*. All other are wrong paths.51

And then goes on to add—and this is very important:

In the genital organs of the woman, in between her breasts, in their navels and armpits, it is said [in the scriptures] that there are very subtle living beings. How can there be the mendicant ordination (*pravrajya*) for them [since they must violate the vow of *ahimsa*]?52

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49 The Digambar Acharya Kundakunda enjoys the preeminent status in the Digambar hierarchy, second only to Acharya Bhadradhah. His prestige probably derives from the fact that his prolific writings and compilations of a great many liturgical texts contributed vastly to the creation of a parallel Digambar canon after the group lost the original sermons of Mahavira and the exegesis of his *gananaharas*. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, op. cit., p. 32.
50 “The *Sutraprabharta* of the Digambar Acharya Kundakunda (c. A.D. 150),” in *ibid.*, pp. 31-40.
51 *ibid.*, p. 35.
52 *ibid.*
Further:

Women have no purity of mind; they are by nature fickle-minded. They have menstrual flows. [Therefore] they is no meditation for them free from anxiety.\(^{53}\)

Dundas considers this to be an incorrect attribution to Kundakunda, representative more of the later attitudes than the early Digambar views.\(^{54}\)

Nonetheless, Kundakunda does enjoy the reputation of launching the most frontal attack on the legitimacy of clothed mendicancy and received, quite expectedly, a scathing rebuttal from the \(\text{circa A.D. 6}^{\text{th}}\) century. Shvetambar Acharya Jinabhadra who made out a case for the place of clothes and the use of begging bowls—but remained silent on Kundakunda’s dismissal of women’s ability to undertake the ascetic vows. It was left to an obscure Jain sect called the Yapaniyas\(^{55}\) to lead the first full-scale scholarly counter charge in defence of the possibility of \textit{strimoksha} in the form of \textit{Strinirvanaparakarana} (‘A Treatise on the \textit{Nirvana} of Women’), and a supplementary commentary \textit{Svopajnavritti} by \textit{circa A.D. 9}^{\text{th}}\ century Saktayana.\(^{56}\)

**Temporal and Spiritual Inequalities:**

Saktayana cites the compatibility of the three Jewels—Right knowledge (\textit{samyak-gyan}), Right Conduct (\textit{samyak-charitra}) and Right View (\textit{samyak-darshana})—with women as proof enough that their spiritual liberation is possible. Pre-empting the Digambar

\(^{53}\) \textit{ibid.}, p. 35.

\(^{54}\) Paul Dundas, \textit{The Jains}, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 242.

\(^{55}\) Origins of the Yapaniya sect are shrouded in mystery. See Jaini, \textit{Gender and Salvation}, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 41-42.

\(^{56}\) “The \textit{Strinirvanaparakarana} with the \textit{Svopajnavritti} of the Yapaniya Acharya Saktayana (\textit{circa A.D. 814-867}),” in \textit{ibid.}, pp. 41-107. Saktayana was hailed by both sects as a great grammarian, and his status among the Jains equals that of Panini.
claim that the perfection of these three jewels in women is impossible, he dismisses this as “mere verbiage” unsupported by a “valid means of verification, a scripture derived from a reliable person, or any other [form of proper reasoning].”

Saktayana catalogues the major arguments of Digambar opponents and proceeds to demolish each, one by one. Women’s inability to fall to the lowest hell owing to her incapacity for extreme action is held up by Digambars as corroboration of her inability to rise to the summit of the universe in an exalted state. Digambars then go beyond a reliance on scriptural authority to cite instances of women’s inferior status in society in general and in religious organization in particular to bolster their argument of females’ innate spiritual inferiority. They cite the inability of women to engage in doctrinal debates and to attain certain occult powers called *labdhis* which are considered essential for engaging in these debates, but which are also in both traditions considered the exclusive preserve of men. Finally, Digambars point to the unequal status of nuns and monks in monastic orders, invoking especially the Shvetambar mendicant rule, which stipulates that “even if a nun is ordained for a hundred years she must pay homage to a young monk, even if that monk has been ordained that very day, by going forth to meet him and by greeting him in reverence.”

In the Digambar view then, the existence of their low status within the ecclesiastical order, their non-participation in debates, and the denial of *labdhi* powers to women was evidence of their inferiority in reaching the required perfection without which *moksha* was impossible.

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57 Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, op cit., p. 49.
58 *ibid*, see pp. 66-70.
Saktayana denies the validity of the first charge and after laying out protracted syllogistic formulae, he concludes:

Just because men and women have unequal capacities with reference to falling into the hells, it does not prove that there is no parity in their upward passage into a pure state of existence.\(^59\)

He argues that the possession of supernatural powers and skills in debating, acquired through excellence in austerities, is not a prerequisite for the attainment of moksha. None of the passages in the scriptures dealing with the theme of realization of moksha lists this, or for that matter other conditions—such as the ability to read Purvas (extinct texts)—as a necessary qualification for reaching the exalted state of nirvana. Saktayana’s strategy is not to refute the incapacities of women for scriptural learning, attainment of powers and distinction in austerities, but to unyoke the accomplishment of moksha from any of these factors by denying any concomitance between the two. Moreover, he says, the list of inordainable people which includes only women of certain types (for example, pregnant or those with a young child) indicates that there was no blanket prohibition on women’s ordination, nor any doubt on their ability to achieve moksha.

The bulk of Saktayana’s text is devoted towards establishing clothes as mere aids (upkarana) of mendicant life, akin to the whiskbroom, as opposed to possessions. He cites the Shvetambar text, Brihatkaipa, which makes repeated references to the nirgranthi (literally a woman without any possessions). Such a title would not have been possible, reasons Saktayana, if her clothes were warranted as possessions. It is

\(^{59}\) ibid, p. 53.
incorrect, he says, to equate the nun with the householder merely on account of her clothes: while the householder is forever implicated in the sense of possession, the nun has already freed herself of any such covetousness. A more apt comparison would be with an ailing monk who accepts clothes to cover his pus-dripping hemorrhoids and anal fistulas (which attract insects and result in injury and harm to them). To the charge that by wearing clothes, nuns risk inflicting himsa on the millions of microbial organisms that nestle in the clothes, Saktayana counters that a nun, by diligently following the conduct laid down by the arhats is not a perpetrator of violence. Injury can occur only through carelessness or wilfulness—both of which the nun lacks.\textsuperscript{60}

**Who is a Woman?**

A passage in Umasvati's *Tattvartha Sutra*—a text recognized by both warring sides—which affirms the linga of the liberated souls, thus suggesting that women could achieve liberation too, has been a major source of confusion and contention. The use of the term manyushini has been grist to the mill of Jain scholars who have interpreted and deconstructed the term to harness it for their own argument. For the Svetambaras, it is conclusive confirmation of their argument in favour of stri moksha, whereas the Digambaras cite the Jain distinction between draavyastri and bhavastri, arguing that the liberated beings are physical males with female bhava and sexual feelings—to reject any suggestion of stri moksha.

Saktayana’s defence of stri moksha insists on the primary meaning of the word woman, and even goes as far as to suggest that in its singular meaning, manyusini

\textsuperscript{60} *ibid.*, pp. 59-61.
refers to one who is endowed with the physical characteristics of breasts and the vagina. In a break from the dual conception of gender and sexuality we encountered earlier, he discards the understanding of *striveda* as sexual desire for a male, describing it simply as female sexual desire. Saktayana further says that *moksha* derives from a purity of thought and not purity of body; all sexual feelings have been sublimated at the stage of siddhahood since all three types of libidos are destroyed when one enters the ninth *gunasthana.*\(^{61}\) Moreover, if it was possible for physical males with female *bhava* to attain *moksha*, as Digambars allege, it is also possible for women to experience desire for another woman and become notional males. Here, Saktayana raises another important problem: the distinguishing of people on the basis of sexual feelings rather than biological gender would imply a sanctioning of same-sex marriage and prohibition on monks to live together.\(^{62}\) He concludes that third-sex desire is a perversion of male and female sexualities and not a third kind of sexuality. Just as in the absence of “a lusty woman, a man might fornicate with animals”\(^{63}\) Thus it is wrong to impute that *manyushini* implies a man with a female sexuality.\(^{64}\)

**Shame and Desire:**

A comprehensive repudiation of *Strinirvanaprakarana* emerged a hundred years later with Prabhachandra’s *Nyayakumudachandra.*\(^{65}\) Almost a point-by-point rebuttal, Prabhachandra’s work is remarkable for drawing an association between the (womanly) feelings of bashfulness or shame (*laijì*) and their impulse and necessity to

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\(^{61}\) *ibid.*, p. 83.

\(^{62}\) *ibid.*, p. 87.

\(^{63}\) *ibid.*, p. 89.

\(^{64}\) *ibid.*, pp. 90-9.

\(^{65}\) “The *Nyayakumudachandra* of the Digambar Acharya Prabhachandra (c. 980-1065),” in *ibid.*, 109-138.
remain clothed, and then by relating this to their unremitting sexual drives. Rejecting the Yapaniya argument that clothes are mere aids (upkarana) and not possessions, for nuns lack the sense of possession, Prabhachandra is adamant that clothes are a certain sign of covetousness. Moreover he argues, if clothes could be allowed to women to dispel their feelings of shame—with no loss to their potential for gaining moksha—it would also be acceptable that they be allowed to take lovers to calm their sexual desires. Prabhachandra’s singular achievement was in identifying womanly lajja with insatiable sexual drives.

“[Digambar]: Objection. Surely, then, why not also allow them to take a lover in order to combat the torment of concupiscence, for there is no distinction [between dispelling shame and dispelling sexual desire]?  

So forceful was Prabhachandra’s confutation of stri moksha by insisting that manyusini refers at all times to biological males experiencing striveda that he acquired a supremely authoritative position within the Digambar position and became the target of all polemical exercises emanating from the Shvetambar camp.

Prabhachandra’s arguments, ample as they were, received ideological reinforcement from the circa A.D. 12th-century Acharya Jayasena’s work, Tatparyavritti. Drawing heavily from Kundakunda’s Sutraprabharta, the most striking feature of Jayasena’s commentary is the explication of those elements that had remained embedded and only hinted at, in the writings of Kundakunda: namely, woman’s bodily condition. In Jayasena’s hands, many more noxious characteristics come to be attributed to her

66 ibid., p. 127.
67 A later Shvetambar writer referred to his work as the double-forked tongue of the Digambar snake. ibid., p. 113.
68 “The Tatparyavritti of the Digambar Acharya Jayasena (c. 1180),” in ibid., pp. 139-147.
body and we see a thoroughgoing condemnation of women: as purveyors of all deluding passions, as repositories of impurities, and characterized by fickleness of mind and weakness of body. We come across for the first time such a malevolent evocation of menstrual blood:

Women are subject to the sudden oozing of blood [i.e., the menstrual flow]; which brings about both fickleness of mind as well as weakness of body and generates extremely subtle human organisms. 69

Jayasena admits that even male bodies may harbour subtle organisms—a charge originally brought by Kundakunda against women—but this is akin to a mere “speck of poison” in comparison to women whose entire bodies are suffused with poison. Moreover, he argues a woman’s body is not conducive to the severe austerities necessary for salvation, its weakness deriving from a lack of the first three samhanana (the admantine joints of bones that lend sturdiness to the body). Significantly, those males who experience the female libido do possess the samhanana and hence are qualified to attain nirvana. Jayasena thus reduces the question of attainment of moksha to the presence or absence of a couple of joints of bones.

To Kundakunda and Jayasena’s harsh indictment of the female anatomy and her bodily processes, Meghavijaya, 18th-century Shvetambar scholar-monk, adds that it is due to the millions of beings lodged in her body that “women suffer from constant itching…which does not allow them ever to have any cessation of sexual desire.” 70 In fact he goes a step further to suggest that menstrual flow is not an involuntary (that

69 ibid., pp. 142-3.
70 “The Yuktiprabodha with Sampajnavritti of the Shvetambar upadhyaya Meghavijaya (c. 1653-1704),” in ibid., pp. 159-193; p. 166.
is, a natural function of a woman’s body but a voluntary act directly connected with a woman’s libido, comparable to a man’s seminal discharge. Nonetheless, his defence of *stri moksha* is vigorous and novel. He attacks the clubbing of women with *napunsakas* as incapable of achieving *moksha*. Meghavijaya argues that the hermaphrodite’s incapacity for liberation arises not from his physical gender, but from his insatiable libido (“a village conflagration” remember). With this, the Shvetambar conception of sexuality returns to the familiar model of a breach between physical gender and sexual orientation, which some of the earlier Shvetambar authors had repudiated in order to fix a singular meaning of the term, *manyushini*. Women’s libidos are like men’s; whereas hyper-libidinousness is the sign of the hermaphrodites. Meghavijaya thus shifts the burden of eligibility for ordination and *moksha* from physical body to sexual orientation, even allowing for hunchbacks and other physically deformed people access to a life of asceticism. While not disputing that women in general do display the defects highlighted by Digamabars (such as crookedness, excessive sexual desire, falsehood and so on), he urges for distinguishing the category of nuns—who undertake the vows of celibacy—from the general population of women. He approvingly cites earlier authors who have written:

> In the vagina of a woman also, beings with two or more senses...are born, numbering from 100,000 to 20,000, up to a maximum of 300,000.
Again, he says:

In the uterus of a woman who has been once united with a man, as many as 900,000 five-sensed human beings can be conceived at any moment.

Of these 900,000, only one or two will be successful in being born as fully developed human beings, whereas all the rest will simply perish then and there. 72

Thus, a woman is the site of *himsa* and injury. However, Meghavijaya does not set great store by this *himsa*. The violence that ensues from the flow of menstrual blood in the vagina of a woman is akin to, in Meghavijaya’s estimation, excess of phlegm due to a sinus condition; the flow of blood or pus due to wounds or boils. Even though Meghavijaya turns menstruation into a wholly volitional and libidinal exercise—akin to the seminal discharge among men—which would disappear with a woman’s advancement along the spiritual stages and effacement of *veda*; Meghavijaya can hardly be held guilty, as indeed Leslie holds him, of assigning it terrifying qualities. 73 In Meghavijaya’s view, it is only a minor defect—similar to unpleasant voices, deformity of limbs, dark complexion, etc. Unpleasant it may be, but there is nothing truly horrific about it.

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71 *ibid.*, p. 179.
72 *ibid.*, p. 179.
Malli Devi or Mallinath?

It must be mentioned here that in recognition of women’s capacity for salvation, Shvetambars depict the 19th tirthankara or ‘ford maker’, Malli, as a woman—whilst Digambars worship her as the male Mallinath. Nonetheless, Shvetambar images and idols (except for one single image; see Image 3.1) do not represent Malli as a woman but almost as an asexual being with the absence of the diacritical marks of her sex—picked up promptly by the Digambar as conclusive proof of the 19th tirthankara’s male gender. Moreover, argue the Digambars, the Shvetambar admission of the possibility of a woman gaining moksha at the age of eight suggests that the girl would have sufficiently developed breasts and may have even experienced menstrual periods. A menstruating kevalin would only evoke repugnance and surely this is not acceptable. This harks back to the sectarian difference pertaining to the nature of the omniscient being. Digambar claim that at the moment of attaining kevalgyan, the ordinary body is transformed into a pure gross body, which is not only able to sustain itself without the ordinary bodily functions, but also rids itself off all bodily fluids and discharges such as urine, blood and semen; Shvetambars, on the other hand, deny any such transformation of the body. Meghavijaya’s formulation of menstrual blood as a volitional, libidinal discharge thus begins to make sense. Pressed to respond to the Digambar charge of a ‘menstruating Malli Bhagwati’, Meghavijaya conceived of an inextricable association between menstrual flow and libido, which, as one proceeds along the various gunasthanas, recedes, until finally, at

74 Jaini, Gender and Salvation, op. cit., p. 141. Also see James Laidlaw, Riches and Renunciation, op. cit., Chapter 11.
the attainment of arhatship, ceases to exist. And with it, ceases too the menstrual
flow. 75

It may be added here that even Shvetambaras depict Malli as being born a female as
atonement for sins in the past birth! 76

Negative views are by no means obsolete; rather they continue to inform the
understanding of the relation between women and religious pursuits. Rajachandra, a
prominent Jain male ascetic formulating his views on women wrote:

All the substances that are contemptible—all of them
have a residence in her body, and for them it is also
the place of origin. In addition, the happiness derived
there from is only momentary and a cause of
exhaustion and repeated excitements. 77

In exploring the relationship between Christianity and sexuality, Foucault had
demonstrated how the technique of confession attempted to pin down the
complicity between mind and body by wrenching out admissions of guilt with
connection to one's sexuality. The technique of confession was central to the
mechanism of maintaining the power of religious institutions. An interesting parallel
could be drawn between the Christian confession and pratikramana, a Jain ritual
confession of transgressions. However, pratikramana lacks the relentless focus on sex
as is to be found in the Christian confession. It remains firmly alert to the

75 See Jaini, Gender and Salvation, op. cit., p. 193.
76 Mahabala and his six friends had made a pact to undertake fasts of identical lengths.
Coveting to accrue greater merit than his companions, Mahabala continued his fast much
after his friends had broken theirs. This amounted to violence and Mahabala was
condemned to be born a woman in the subsequent birth.
77 See Laidlaw, Riches and Renunciation, op.cit., p. 237.
contraventions of the principle of *ahimsa* instead, according to Laidlaw. It is *himsa*, rather than the failings of the flesh, that constitutes the “magnetic pole” of human frailty for Jains. Thus Laidlaw says that confessions about sex are not likely to reveal a secret sexual self as in Christianity but only a soul entangled in the web of *karmas*. This gives rise to the harsh regimen of discipline that is geared towards minimizing the karma-inducing actions and thoughts:

Uncovering the soul does not require an interrogating search for an inner truth, but stilling the mind and body through discipline, so as to prevent the action which reproduces the soul’s embodiment.\(^78\)

But surely Laidlaw can be held culpable for ignoring the extent to which *himsa* comes to be associated with the sheer physicality of the female. Violence, sexual desires, and women are corralled into a single zone; deliverance is difficult for women whose bodies constitute the locus of violence (and sexual desire)—the very antithesis of Jainism. Asceticism then comes to be defined as masculine and almost exclusively in terms of semen retention. Thus chastity requires the accumulation of semen within the body through rigorous self-control and training. In women the sexual energies may be cooled through fast, i.e, abstinence from food, which also connote sexual purity and family honour.

Leslie writes that it is not sexual orientation, the *veda*, but a woman’s biophysical character that evokes disgust and becomes a source of her spiritual incapacities. But we must take into account the fierceness of competition between the two sects to establish the legitimacy of their path of mendicancy and monastic practices. An

\(^{78}\) *ibid.*, p. 258.
attack on the possibility of women's salvation, on account of their clothed existence, is foremost also a fusillade against the authority of Shvetambar mendicants as true ascetics. It would be better to regard the woman's question as a site for contestation; and while one side may cite her sheer physicality as antithetical to a life of spirituality, the other side may dismiss it as of no consequence. It remains nonetheless that both sides share the portrayal of women's bodies as disgusting and hateful, the very repositories of *himsa*.

**Conclusion:**
The question remains: has Jainism spawned a culture that is sympathetic to the independent spiritual aspirations of women? Does it espouse models of womanhood that assist the entry of women into the ascetic fold? Or does it continue to regard them as hostile to the pursuit of renunciation by either upholding domesticity as the only valid path, or denigrating their capacity for a life of asceticism? Examination of the culturally coded roles ascribed to women yields a multiplicity of images: pious nuns, great mothers, and even a female tirthankara. All of these are glorified for their commitment to the Jain faith, indeed celebrated as "active militants of Jainism". The triumph of their religiosity in the face of odds is memorialized in a variety of ways. This would suggest that a premium is attached to women's self-focused religiosity and autonomous spiritual aspirations.

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79 In a different context of examining the portrayal of homosexuality in the Bible, Robin Scroggs proposes the parameters for how Biblical texts may be used to illumine debates over issues such as homosexuality etc. the parameters are: 1) do the work of exegesis to understand the meaning of Biblical statements in their historical and literary context; 2) compare the specific meaning of the texts with the major theological and ethical themes of the Bible; 3) determine whether the cultural context addressed in the text bears a reasonable similarity to the modern context in which it is to be applied." Cited in Mark D. Smith, "Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1:26-27", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 64, No.2, Summer, 1996, p. 227.

If we confine our analysis of the preponderance of nuns among the Jains to the ideological realm alone—exploring the models of womanhood that the culture of Jainism constructs—we are likely to be confronted by a multiplicity of images pulling in different directions. And the problem of representations of women within Jainism and how this corresponds to the high number of female mendicants would remain just as muddled. In the subsequent chapters, we will now turn to investigate the structural causes that pull Jain women towards asceticism and sustain their women orders.