

**Rsabha (left) and Mahavira,  
Orissa, 13th Century.**

**L**IBERATION or escape from the incessant cycle of birth, death and rebirth is the highest goal in many religions and the path to this state of *moksha* is through a life of rigorous asceticism. This ideally implies the renunciation of wealth, sexuality and the life and luxury of the householder. The renunciator discourses exhibit a particular ambiguity in that they open up spaces for women to question and sometimes invert tradition, to seize their moments of empowerment and autonomy while at the same time there is an overall cultural structuring of renunciation and salvation itself as an overwhelmingly male pursuit. We seek here to examine the gendered nature of salvation and religious roles in religion in general and in Jainism in particular.

In most religious traditions, women are not considered legitimate soteriological agents and the scriptures and texts abound with misogynist views. Women are thought to represent *maya*, the

## Caught in the Wheel

### Women and Salvation in Indian Religions

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illusory and transient material world that needs to be renounced but draws the self into unending cycles of bondage.<sup>1</sup> This denial to women has its roots in a deep seated contempt—a kind of gynophobia<sup>2</sup>—for their sexuality and bodily processes such as menstruation and reproduction. As the purported bearers of an uncontrollable libido, not only are women antithetical to the project of salvation, but are also perceived as snares and temptations for the male spiritual aspirants.

The challenge to orthodox Brahminism came in the form of heterodox religions such as Buddhism and Jainism, both of which provided institutional means for women to pursue their spiritual goals. The dissent movements of the *bhakti* powerfully complicated the antagonism towards women through the process of gendering devotion

itself as feminine. One of the central metaphors of religious experience in this tradition has been love,<sup>3</sup> seen almost entirely from the perspective of the woman, either as a painful phase of separation or as ecstatic union with the divine lover. The spiritual urge comes to mimic the fierce “womanly” sexual urge and even male saints take on feminine voice, while the woman saints themselves abandon and renounce their earthly ties for the love of the Lord, to become his bride. The “feminine” qualities of surrender, compassion and nurturance are foregrounded and allow female saints to subvert the everyday normative gender roles required of them.<sup>4</sup> This mode of religiosity allowed women like Mira to defy sati and other practices associated with widowhood. This followed from their refusal to recognize the validity of earthly marriage in the first place. While *bhakti* is a recognizably feminized form of worship, Khandelwal has observed that even among the Dashnamis who are schooled in elitist and patriarchal traditions which are premised on the transcendence of gender-categories, *sanyasa* may be gendered as feminine, with the male *sanyasis* also occasionally taking up the qualities of the mother.<sup>5</sup>

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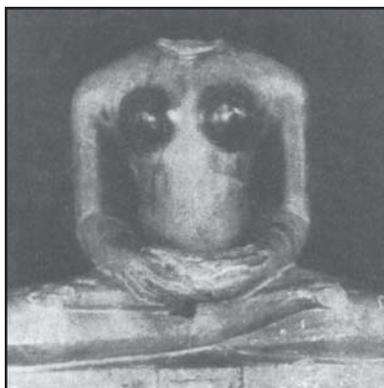
female renouncer, like the widow and the prostitute, lies outside the pale of social norms. By being wedded to a heavenly consort, the renouncer is like a prostitute, the eternal bride—the *nitya sumangli*—who lives her religious life outside male control. In seeking union with God, she is also similar to the widow who displays loyalty to her marital ties even beyond the life of her husband. Her self-denying and ascetic lifestyle is similar to the widow.<sup>6</sup> However such autonomy and agency was available only in relation to God. It is highly improbable that this had any significant impact on transforming gender relations among the laity. The most prevalent codified religious roles proffered to women lie within the domain of the household. The primary moral and religious duty of a married woman is *pativratadharmā*. Her actions should be directed towards the welfare of her husband and all that is related to him—his home, kin group, and the performance of his duties towards his ancestors and deities.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is she who by begetting him sons enables him to pay off his debts to the ancestors and attain liberation. The two primary vehicles towards the fulfilment of this duty (*dharma*) are the votive rites, *vratas*, that women observe, and sati. The *Dharmashastras* and the *Smritis* lay down that it is in performing her wifely and motherly duties that a woman attains salvation. McGee notes that the compilers of religious texts for women do not discount the possibility of liberation for women that might accrue from her observing the *vratas* but prescribe *saubhagya* or marital felicity as the ultimate good.<sup>8</sup> Thus for women, “this worldly” duties are inextricably linked to the “other worldly” goals and achievements.

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reproductive capacities and disrupt the normative order of the *sansara*. Not surprisingly, there is a deep mistrust and antagonism towards only within Hinduism but other South Asian religions, towards women ascetics as well as those women who fail to fulfil their ideal, prescribed domestic role. One may recall Buddha’s reluctance in allowing women entry into the *samgha* and the subordinate status of the nuns to the monks. Concomitantly, laywomen are presented in a positive light in Buddhist literature in comparison to the nuns who appear as a source of embarrassment.<sup>9</sup>

Widowhood is considered especially contaminating because it results from the woman’s *dharma* not being strong enough to ensure her husband’s longevity and her *saubhagya*. A widow, however could escape this contamination by performing sati. Sati represents the



**Stone image of female ascetic.**

final and the most perfect act of self-effacement and fulfilment of her duties and religious pursuit through which a woman may achieve her greatest honour within orthodox Hinduism.

Many a times however, it is possible to amalgamate *stridharma* or wifely duties with women’s purely personal religious cravings in a variety of ways and in varying degrees. The *bhakti* tradition displays the absence of institutionalized monasticism with many of the saints being householders. Ramaswamy has cited the example of Bahinbai in medieval Maharashtra and Anandmayi Ma and Shraamani in twentieth century Bengal who continued to be housewives despite their spiritual inclinations.<sup>10</sup> Here the resolution remains partial as tension is perpetually palpable between the conjugal couple. Courtwright has observed how the wifely and the ascetic duties may be combined without friction in the lives of the *jivit satimatas*—the living satis.<sup>11</sup> These were women who had declared their intention to commit sati at their husband’s pyre but were prevented by their kinsmen for fear of criminal prosecution. Instead they followed a life of extreme asceticism. While the renouncers or ascetics are believed to be able to transcend sensory perceptions by their *tap*, the heat of their meditation, the *satimatas* are kept alive by the heat of their *pativrata dharma*. Their detachment from the world led Harlan to comment that “the living *satimata* remains in this world but is no longer of it... ”<sup>12</sup>

### **Renunciation in Jainism**

Jainism is especially relevant to the study of renunciation in India because the central ideals of this religion are the twin principals of

non-attachment and non-violence. It comprises a single-minded pursuit of severe individual asceticism and avoidance of harm to even the most tiny of living organisms. While these two pursuits are also practised by the laity, they are most starkly inscribed on the bodies of the ascetics. Those belonging to the Digambar (sky clad) tradition go naked, while those in the Shvetambar (white clad) wear only white clothes and face masks (*muh patti*) to avoid inhaling and killing microscopic living beings.

One of the most striking features of Jainism is its recognition of women as legitimate soteriological agents in its fourfold division of society (*caturvidhasangha*), into *sadhus*, *sadhvis*, *shraviks* and *shravikas*. The two former categories are the ascetics and the two latter, the male and female laity.<sup>13</sup> Even more startling is the visible preponderance of the female ascetics over the male ascetics. Sources such as the *Kalpasutra* clearly state that on Mahavira's death, the *tirtha* that he had founded contained a body of female ascetics that was two and a half times as large as the number of male ascetics and the lay community contained twice as many laywomen as laymen.<sup>14</sup>

The figure of the religious Jain woman—both the ascetic and the lay—has been used to define the boundaries and the self identity of the community. The question of women and salvation has formed the core of polemics between Digambar and Shvetambar as “a kind of protracted metaphor for a struggle over the spiritual validity of the two paths of Jaina mendicancy”.<sup>15</sup> This question itself represented the final hardening of sectarian boundaries.<sup>16</sup> The Digambar insisted that ascetic nudity was a prerequisite to the path



**Sthanakavasi nuns**

of liberation and therefore, the woman's inability to shed clothes excluded her from ascetic life and enlightenment. Women's assumed continual requirement for clothes indicated that they could never be free from the powerful emotions of shame and fear arising from their naked bodies. While accepting the impossibility of female nudity *Shaktayana*, a Shvetambar text, dismisses the centrality of nudity in the development of religious life. Indeed, the Shvetambar depict the nineteenth ford maker or the *Tirthankara*, Malli, as a woman. However if the Digambar worship her as the male Mallinath, the Shvetambar images and idols also

do not represent her as a woman but as an almost asexual being with the absence of the diacritical marks of her sex.<sup>17</sup>

When nakedness becomes a mark of one's detachment from wealth, power and desire, the female saints and ascetics, who are socially constrained to cover their bodies, find their voices silenced and their religious experiences erased. Women are, by this means, perpetually trapped in their bodily existence, their femaleness that they can never transcend. The *Yukti Prabodha*, a 17th century Shvetambar text summarizing the Digambar view says,

Women, namely those beings who have the physical sign of the human female, do not attain *moksa* in that very life for their souls do not manifest that pure transformation which is called “a perfect being” ...the biologically female is distinguished ... by the fact that she has an impure body, as is evident by the flow of menstrual blood each month.<sup>18</sup>

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This flow of menstrual blood is believed to destroy countless minute organisms and to stir a deep sexual desire in women which results in further violence. “When a man and a woman unite sexually, these beings in the vagina are destroyed, just as if a red-hot iron were inserted into a hollow piece of bamboo filled with sesame seeds.”<sup>19</sup> Such views are by no means obsolete, they rather continue to inform the understanding of the relation between women and religious pursuits. Rajcandra, 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.”<sup>20</sup>

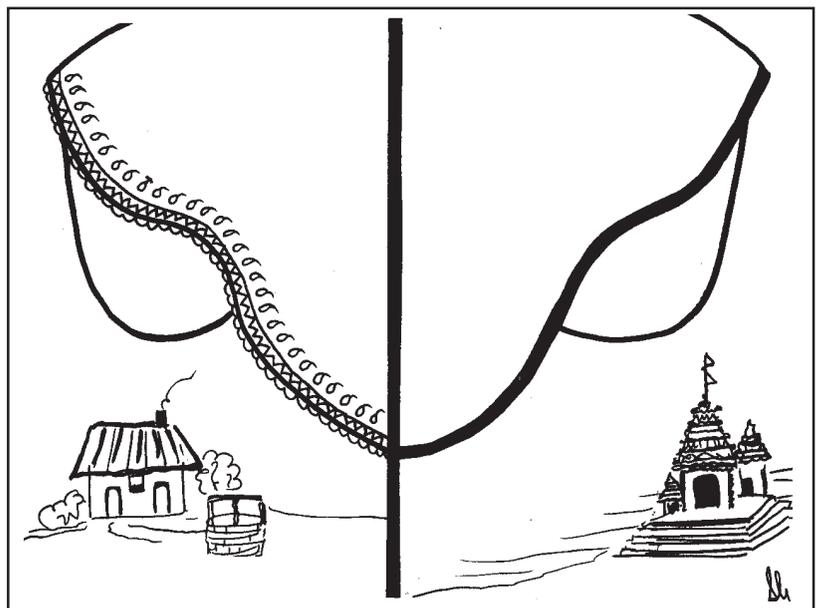
Thus deliverance is difficult for women whose bodies constitute the locus of violence and sexual desire—the very antitheses of Jainism. Asceticism then comes to be defined as masculine and almost always includes semen retention as an essential component. Thus chastity defined in this manner requires the accumulation of semen within the body through rigorous self-control and training of the body. In women, sexual energies may be cooled through fasting and abstinence. If penance through fasting is the religious duty par excellence for laywomen, donation is the primary male religious exercise. Even though women have been recognized as the principal almsgivers, on account of their control over the economic resources within the family, men indulge in it on a scale and manner that makes donation a uniquely Jain religious institution.<sup>21</sup>

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Religious roles and institutions, property, and legal systems all intersect with gender in varying ways to negotiate and delineate the boundaries of the community. These questions were most forcefully foregrounded in the debate prior to the enactment of the 1937 Hindu Women’s Right to Property Act. The legal validity of the specifically Jain practice of widow inheritance in contradistinction to the Hindu system, where either the son or the close male agnates of the deceased man inherit was widely discussed. Jain widows, especially childless widows, could exercise considerable control over property. Not rarely, the widows would donate their inheritance to religious institutions as an act of *dana*. Joseph gives an account of litigation that ensued whereby the

dead husbands’ male kin pleaded to be governed according to the Hindu law of succession and inheritance.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the imperative to retain control over property led the Jain men to mobilize the modern systems of law and rework the gendered nature of religious duties. Women’s right to donate was enshrined by religious institutions that benefited from it but opposed by the laymen for it hit at their interests. There is, therefore, always an interplay between power and definitions of religious ideals and values; and women’s position is very often undermined.

Not only are the monastic orders hierarchically organized, the relation between the male and female ascetics also seems to represent the gendered relations of super-ordination and subordination in a domestic setting. The nuns are expected to show deference to the monks and even the most senior nun must remain submissive to the most junior monk’s authority. The male ascetic is governed by two persons—the teacher and the preceptor—while the female ascetic is governed by three: the female superior



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(*pavattini*), the preceptor and the teacher.<sup>23</sup>

Even though Jainism has institutionalized monastic orders, household ascetics are by no means completely absent. The renouncers of the *Khartar gacch* endorse the view that it is possible to practice asceticism while remaining in the household. Rejecting the outer renunciation, this line of thought has advocated the religion of the soul. However taking on the vows of celibacy and personal seclusion are not available to householder women in the same way that it may be available to men, for neither her labour nor her sexuality belong to her in the first place.<sup>24</sup>

Jain renunciation in the contemporary world increasingly contradicts the brahmanical model of the four *asramas*. Increasing number of *sadhvis* are neither widows, nor old women who have lived a full life the of householder. They are primarily young unmarried women who have taken the *diksa*. The women do not completely sever their ties with the natal family and friends,<sup>25</sup> and their lives are closely intertwined with those of the laity.

The study of Jain women ascetics has opened up a range of questions. Falk has observed that while the patriarchal norms of the predominant Hindu culture devalued and led to the disappearance of the female monastic orders in Buddhism, Jainism somehow managed to escape this historical fate. The misogyny of the Jain texts appears to be in contradiction in some sense to the prevalence of large number of *sadhvis*—nor does it explain the authority and power that they exercise in the community. Secondly, the increasing incidence of younger women taking *diksa* may be understood in terms of the

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notions of choice and agency. Jain women's ascetic participation despite the fact that authoritative texts remain strongly located in the social context of patriarchal religious culture need some explanation. For example, we need to explore more closely the social factors that drive women to renounce their families and lead wandering lives of mendicants, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the relationship between women and religion among the Jains. This perhaps, has a bearing on larger issues of women in ascetic, religious life. □

#### NOTES:

- 1 Lawrence A. Babb, "Indigenous Feminism in a Modern Hindu Sect" in *Signs*, Vol.9, no.3, p.108.
- 2 Olville (1992: 77) in Meena Khandelwal, "Ungendered Atma, Masculine Virility and Feminine Compassion: Ambiguities in Renunciate Discourses on Gender" in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, no.31,1, p.83.
- 3 A.K. Ramanujan, "On Women Saints" in Hawley and Wulff (eds), *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1989), p.316.
- 4 Uma Chakravarty, p.318.
- 5 Meena Khandelwal, *op.cit.*, p.80.
- 6 Catherine Clementin-Ojha., "Outside the Norms: Women Ascetics in Hindu Society" in *EPW*, 1988, p.WS-34. The physical appearance of the widow and the renouncer is also strikingly similar.
- 7 See Paul B. Courtright, "Sati, Sacrifice and Marriage: The Modernity of Tradition," in Harlan and Courtright (eds) *From the Margins of Hindu*

*Marriage*, (NY:OUP, 1995), p.186 for an explication.

- 8 Mary McGee, "Desired Fruits: Motive and Intention in the Votive Rites of Hindu Women" in Leslie (ed.) *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, (New Jersey: Associated Univ. Press, 1991), p.77.
- 9 Nancy Aur Falk, "The case of the Vanishing Nuns: The fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian buddhism" in Nancy A.Falk and Rita M. Gross (eds) *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives*, Belmont: Wadsworth, 1989, pp.164-5. Falk attributes this to the norms of the surrounding Hindu culture.
- 10 Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Walking Naked: Women, Society and Spirituality in South India*, (Simla: IAS, 19), p.12.
- 11 Courtright, *op.cit.*, p.190.
- 12 Lindsay Harlan (1992: 173) quoted in Courtright p.191.
- 13 N. Shanta, *The Unknown Pilgrims: The Voice of the Sadhvis, The History, Spirituality and the Life of the Jaina Women Ascetics*, (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1997), p.428.
- 14 Paul Dundas, *The Jains*, London and New York: Routledge,1992, p.48.
- 15 Goldman (1991:xx) quoted in Julia Leslie, "Menstruation Myths" in Leslie (ed.) *Myths and Mythmaking*, (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), p.98.
- 16 Dundas *op.cit.*, p.49.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp.48-51. Also see James Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation: Religion, Economy and the Society among the Jains*, ch.11, pp.230. Ramaswamy, *op.cit.*, ch.3, pp.69-104.
- 18 Leslie, 1996, *op.cit.*, p.96.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p.97.
- 20 See Laidlaw, *op.cit.*, p.237.
- 21 See Nalini Kabir, "Women in Jainism" in Arvind Sharma (ed.) *Women and Religion*, (Albany: SUNY, 1987), p.127. Josephine Reynell, "Women and the Reproduction of the Jain Community" in Carrithers and Humphry (ed.) *The Assembly of Listeners: Jains in Society*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.51.
- 22 Josephine Reynell, "Equality and Inequality" in N.K.Singhi (ed.) *Ideal, Ideology and Practice: Studies in Jainism*, (Jaipur: Printwell Pub., 1987), pp.54-5.
- 23 Kabir, *op.cit.*, p.122. Also see John E. Cort "The Svetambar Murtipujak Jain Mendicant" in *Man*, 26, for a description of a typical linear sequence of authority among the tapagaccha of the Shvetambar Murtipujak sect.
- 24 See Laidlaw, *op.cit.*, pp.235-41.
- 25 N. Shanta, *op.cit.*, p.433.