Jainism: Parity and the Patriarchy

Scholars of Jainism and Jains have, for decades, espoused with pride the gender parity of Jainism. In the especially patriarchal context from which it comes from, gender equality in Jainism has several markers: high female literacy rates, positive widow narratives, complex characterizations of women, and high female mendicant rates are just a few we will analyze in this paper. To evaluate the status of women in the Jain community, we will split the analysis into two segments: Jain theory and Jain practice (both as they pertain to women). We conclude that, while Jainism still certainly plays host to the patriarchy that stains Indian traditions, it places women comparatively more equal than the surrounding Indian landscape.

Jainism in a Nutshell

While Jains situate themselves in an eternal universe and, as such, understand Jainism as an 'eternal' religion, the age of the Jain tradition continues to be debated. Jain 'gods' are not supreme beings in the normal sense of the word, and this contributes to why Jains are often called the atheists of India. The 'gods' of Jainism, here on referred to as Thirthankars, are twenty-four supreme personalities that positively transformed their communities by espousing the nature of the soul and the importance of nonviolence and non-possessiveness. While they may be naturally understood as prophets, the Thirthankars are notably not beings that can grant wishes or favors; instead, they are illuminary souls that have achieved liberation in a way that is to be emulated and admired. In this time cycle, the last Jain thirthankar was Mahavir Swami. Born in 599 BC, he established what is called the *Chaturvidh Sangh*: the four-fold order of *shravaks* (laymen), *shravikas* (laywomen), *sadhus* (monks), and *sadhvis* (nuns). Jains believe in

the karmic theory of liberation, as well as in the existence of the soul and reincarnation. While beliefs across different sects are remarkably stable in Jainism, there is divergence on the status of women between the Shvetamber and Digamber sects. Shvetambers believe that women can attain liberation while Digambers do not -- this is mainly attributed to the fact that Digambers believe women cannot be naked, which is understood to be a necessary precondition to the ascetic life. Shvetambers do not hold that an ascetic must be nude.[1]

There are two things to note for the arguments that follow. First, when appropriate, the positive arguments will be specific to the Indian state of Gujarat. We make this choice for four reasons: first, Gujarat has one of the largest Jain populations in India; second, Gujarat has the most concentrated Jain population in India; third, Gujarati Jains have, in the last century, produced a significant amount of literature for us to draw from; fourth, Gujarat is home to many of the epic Jain pilgrimage sites (Palitana, Shankheshwar, Taranga, Girnar et al.) and, as such, captures much of the Jain social conscious.[2,3] Second, when appropriate, we will revert to Shvetamber norms. This is because Shvetambers make up more than two-thirds of the Jain community.[4]

Jain Theory

Stories as Imaging

Communal stories and mythology can be incredibly effective at describing the parameters of moral correctness, especially when these stories are generational. Luckily for us, Jainism has

[1] Dundas, Paul. *The Jains*. Psychology Press, 2002.
[2] Shah, Pravin K. *Compendium of Jainism*. Jain Education International, 2015.
[3] Jain, Dheeraj. *Population of Jains in India: A Perspective from the Census 2011*. International School for Jain Studies, 2017.
[4] Merett, Paul, and Natubhai Shah. “Jainism Explained.” *Jainworld*, Jain Samaj Europe.

maintained an extremely stable list of 16 extremely virtuous women, or *mahasatis*, for whom countless devotional hymns and retellings have been dedicated. For this portion of the analysis, we will move through two types of stories: those that describe *shravika* (laywomen) in their lives, and those that feature *sadhvis* (female mendicants). A close reader will likely notice this is how the Jain *sangh* itself is partitioned; the goal is for the analysis to mirror the structure of the Jain community to arrive at more specific conclusions other authors may not have considered. In order to evaluate the themes in these stories, we will pay particularly close attention to how these stories contrast with the most similar contemporary cultural tradition: Hinduism.

Shravikas

Scholars in the field, when commenting on Jain laywomen, have often centered their analysis around Maynasundari. While Maynasundari is not actually on the list of the sixteen *mahasatis* because she was never a mendicant, her story is prominently featured during the annual *Ayambil Oli* festival and she is often described as the model Jain woman. Further, because Maynasundari's is one of the only stories of a religious Jain woman that does not renounce her life, her story is one of the only that connect directly with the lives of Jain laywomen.

In the city of Ujjain, King Prajapal had two daughters, raised with two different religions -- Princess Maynasundari was raised as a Jain, and Princess Sursundari was raised as a Hindu. When it came time for them to be married, King Prajapal gave them the choice to pick their husbands; while Sursundari chose a husband according to her and her father's preferences, Maynasundari refused to pick and lectured to her father that only her *karma* and destiny could

choose her husband. King Prajapal grew angry, and decided to prove that *karma* wouldn't decide Maynasundari's fate by picking her husband for her.

In the city of Champa, a coup had forced the Queen Kamalprabha and Prince Shripal to flee to a community of seven hundred lepers. After Shripal contracted leprosy he was named the king of the lepers. As a Jain *shravika*, Kamalprabha consulted with a Jain mendicant to determine the best course of action. The monk assured Kamalprabha of two things: first, Shripal would have a *dharmapatni* (religious wife); second, Shripal would be cured of his leprosy.

Shortly after King Prajapal's angry declaration, Shripal and his band of seven hundred lepers passed through Ujjain. Upon hearing this, Prajapal invited Shripal to his court in order to offer Maynasundari's hand in marriage. While Shripal initially relented on grounds that Maynasundari receive a better husband, the marriage was soon finalized. Maynasundari chose to go live in the jungle with Shripal rather than remain in her own palace. At this point, people had begun to speak ill of Jainism -- not only had Jainism allowed Maynasundari to speak back to her father, it had allowed her, a princess, to marry a leper. Distressed by this gossip, Maynasundari went to a Jain monk and asked for a mantra that would prove the truth of Jainism. The monk recommended the *Navkar Mantra*, one of the most universally popular Jain mantras, and told her to couple the mantra with a nine-by-nine fast: nine consecutive days of an *Ayambil* fast, twice a year, for four and a half years. Maynasundari and Shripal agreed to undertake the fasts together, and, at the conclusion of the fasts, Maynasundari goes to do a siddchakaran *pujan* (ritual worship). Maynasundari takes the water from the *pujan* and sprinkles it over Shripal to cure him

of his leprosy. The world could now see him not just as the king of the lepers, but as Prince Shripal of Champa.[5]

On continuities between this story and typical Hindu stories of the wife, Kelting notes that the devotional aspect of the Hindu notion of *pativrata* remains constant. Maynasundari takes her husband wholeheartedly, choosing to live with him in the jungle and risking leprosy to be by his side. And, perhaps most importantly, Maynasundari deploys her spiritual knowledge as a means to better her husband's condition. However, there also appear to be dimensions to this story beyond wifely devotion. For one, Maynasundari is a strong-willed spiritual agent even before she becomes a wife; the beginning of the story is predicated in a conflict between Maynasundari and her father because of her faith in Jainism.[6] Considering that Maynasundari still belongs to her father's house magnifies the audacity of the conflict -- she does not belong to a husband's house, so she cannot use that to protect her. Kelting supports this characterization of Maynasundari by noting that in most tellings, it is Maynasundari's spiritual virtues and knowledge that are at the forefront of the story. In this way, Maynasundari's story describe two traits central to the Jain *dharmapatni*, devotion to the husband and religious faith. That faith is appreciated for its own sake introduces a measure of agency for the Jain woman even in a patriarchal system; when a man forces conflict with faith, there is now a reasonable reason for the man to be incorrect, as faith is a legitimate value.

It is also important to note the other stories involving Jain laywomen: those that involve the *jinamatas* (mothers of the *Jinas*). Many devotional hymns and Jain texts celebrate the

---

[5] Kelting, M. Whitney. *Heroic Wives Rituals, Stories and the Virtues of Jain Wifehood*. Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 80–85.

[6] Note that while literary analysis of stories is often perilous as a result of multiple oral retellings, this part of the plot is built into the premise of the story. So, we can be confident that Mayna's characterization as a strong-willed spiritual agent is a fixture through different tellings of this story.

jinamatas, and these hymns are particularly focused on the image of the pregnant *jinamata*. While their stories are mostly related to the birth and rearing of a Jain illuminary, some of the mothers have their own relevant stories. For example, the mother of the first Thirthankar, Marudevi Mata, is said to have been the first person to obtain liberation -- a fact that many Shvetambar women take pride in.[7] However, given that the stories of these mothers are mostly focused on the pregnancy with the *jina*, they also do not diverge significantly from the stories of the *dharmapatni* like Maynasundari's. The stories of the *jinamatas* are largely focused on the nurturing and caring aspects of the mother -- her ability to be the perfect caretaker for others is emphasized.

While the above representations of *shravikas* are generally positive, they are, of course, not the only representations of women in the Jain tradition. It would be disingenuous to not also mention the representations of women as sexual temptresses, of which there are many. Take for example, the great Jain epic *Civakacintamani* written by the Jain Digambar Muni Tiruttakkatevar, which contains a staggering 106 references to female genitalia. The references are often used as synecdoche to refer to women in general, and of the 106 references, twenty-three of them explicitly described the female genitalia as like a 'cobra's hood' -- an omen of poison, danger, and death in Jain literature. In addition, the *Civakacintamani* often likens women's eyes to weapons like spears, swords or arrows.[8] Ryan notes here that there does not appear to be discrimination between what type of woman is described like this; chaste mothers

---

[7] Kelting, M. Whitney. *Singing to the Jinas: Jain Laywomen, Mandal Singing, and the Negotiations of Jain Devotion*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

[8] "Erotic Excess and Sexual Danger in the Civakacintamani." *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Cultures in Indian History*, by James Ryan and John E. Cort, State University of New York, 1998, pp. 71–77.

are just as likely as young servant girls to be reduced to objects of sexual danger. While this example is somewhat extreme, it does not seem abnormal. The story of Jambuswami, the last *kevali* (omniscient), involves his parents begging him to delay renunciation until marrying eight beautiful girls; they are convinced the wives will convince him of the power of worldly pleasures.The story of Illachikumar involves a high-born son who becomes distracted off the course of his life by a beautiful acrobat. He joins the circus with the sole purpose of marrying her, and only realizes his transgressions when he notices a monk receiving alms, unperturbed by the beauty of the donor.[9] In this story, the women is a temptress without intending to be; temptation is made a natural function of the woman. Finally, in the *Sutrakritanga Sutra*, we see a parallel between these stories and scripture.[10] The scripture dedicates an entire chapter to warning monks of the dangers a woman embodies, and describes monks as lions and women as wily trappers who use flesh to bait their game. Sethi's analysis shows that, once again, we see the woman as a fickle-minded temptress.[11]The motivation for all this seems clear: Jainism is a religion intensely focused on foregoing worldly pleasures, explicit about viewing sexual pleasure as spiritual transgressions. From this, the existing patriarchal narrative of the woman as the seductress is magnified to also serve a religious purpose.

In Jain literature, we've seen the laywoman fall largely into two roles -- the religious and dutiful caretaker and the seductress. As a result, it may appear as though Jain literature does not make space for women to occupy non-traditional tropes. However, a closer analysis of the *dharmapatni* reminds us that this is not entirely true; the abnormal emphasis placed on a

---

[9] Ibid., 1.

[10] The *Sutrakritanga Sutra* is the second of twelve *agams*, or canonical scriptures in the Shvetamber tradition.

[11] Sethi, Manisha. "Chastity and Desire: Representing Women in Jainism." *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, pp. 42–59.

laywoman's spiritual growth and virtue does appear distinct from Hindu orthodox descriptions of the *pativrati*. We will now observe the *sadhvi* more closely and see how her journey into a deeper spiritual life is portrayed.

Sadhvis

We will include here the stories of the women that cross the threshold from the laywoman's life to the nun's life, as their stories are centered on the soteriological activity of the women rather than the lay life. Certainly, the most significant story of all the storied *mahasatis* is that of Chandanbala.

Born as Princess Vasumati, she lives a peaceful and spiritual life until her home was attacked. Her kingdom vanquished, she is sold off as a slave but saved by a Jain merchant named Dhana. He adopts and names her Chandanbala on account of her beautiful hair. Unfortunately, his wife grows jealous and misunderstands Dhana's affection for Chandanbala. When Dhana has an extended absence, she takes advantage of it by ordering servants to shave Chandanbala's head, bind her with chains, and lock her in a corner of the house. Chandanbala is locked without food or water for three days until Dhana finds her -- when he looks for food, though, he finds only the boiled lentils for the animals. Chandanbala resolves to eat only after she has offered the lentils as alms to a mendicant. Fortunately for her, at that moment, Mahavir Swami is passing by. He has been fasting for almost six months, awaiting a suitable person to break his fast. He requires the food come from a princess that became a slave, with a shaved head, wearing white clothes, standing on a doorstep with alms, with tears in her eyes. Chandanbala fulfills all of these requirements except for the last, so he turns away from her when she offers alms. Seeing Mahavir Swami turn away, Chandanbala begins to cry, and Mahavir Swami returns as his

conditions are all met. Chandanbala's shackles fall off and her hair miraculously grows back. Shortly after, upon listening to one of Mahavir Swami's sermons, she is moved to become a nun and renounces her worldly life to become Mahavir Swami's first *sadhvi*. She goes to lead a congregation of more than 36,000 *sadhvis* under Mahavir Swami.[12]

Chandanbala's story is recited at most major Jain festivals and is one of the most widely-known in the Jain community. It is a frequently shared not only because it features Mahavir Swami at a pivotal part of his spiritual career, but also because the sacrifice and faith displayed by Chandanbala is touching for many. Her story might be most striking to an orthodox Hindu community that doesn't recognize the capacity of women to be legitimate soteriological agents; the *sadhvi* has left her worldly life in the pursuit of personal spiritual progress. Even in the case of stories like Chandanbala's, where the heroine doesn't have a home or husband to leave behind, the very celebration of women pursuing a self-determined path erodes a patriarchy that has a single vision for what women can be. And, this is true because of the acknowledged capacity of women to renounce laity, so this argument can be generalized to all stories of *sadhvis*, because all of them renounce worldly life. Indeed, popular stories of the *mahasatis* (and really all *sadhvis*) can map the spiritual agency that Jainism affords women. This analysis is corroborated anecdotally by field interviews of sixty-five *sadhvis* conducted by Sethi: of the reasons they gave for renunciation, some of the most frequent were that renunciation was honorable and that renunciation offered autonomy and education.[13]

As was the case with the *shravika* case, we can also observe more notional and scriptural inequality written in for *sadhvis*. The theme from before is echoed, but more subtly. The most

[12] Kelting, M. Whitney. "Candanbālā." *Jainpedia*, Institute of Jainology.
[13] Sethi, Manisha. *Escaping the World: Women Renouncers among Jains*. Routledge, 2016.

obvious type of written inequality is that which explicitly genders conduct for monks and nuns. The *Acharanga Sutra* goes through each of the five major vows that mendicants must take. Examine, for example, the fourth vow of celibacy. It lays down five clauses:

I. 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 …

II. 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 …

III. 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 …

IV. 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 …

V. 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 …[14]

In many ways, the five great vows are what define the ascetic's life. And, as Sethi notes, even though there is meant to be no difference between the vows for men and for women, there is clearly a gendering of these vows -- the scripture reveals itself to be primarily addressing men.

[14] "Acharanga Sutra Book II, Lecture 15." *Translations of Jain Sutras*, by Hermann Jacobi, Rajkot Printing Press, 1906.

[15] While Jainism makes a place for women in its *sangh*, the scripture seems to still make a tacit differentiation between male and female mendicants. We will examine more the effects of such differences in the section on Jain Practices.

In the story of female mendicants we obtain stories the likes of which are not seen at all in traditional orthodox literature. Not only does the woman set her own agenda, she does it for a personal, spiritual upliftment. Even if renunciation isn't a desired path for a laywoman reading these stories, the stories produce an image that is novel in the agency it affords women, and so expands the traditional paths a community recognizes for women. In particular, it legitimizes the woman as a soteriological agent. However, we ought to temper how enthusiastic we are about the parity established between male and female mendicants: the sexualization of the female body, in particular, generates differences in scripture directed towards mendicants.

Gender and Sex

Mallinath

It might be surprising that, until now, not a word has been said about the only Jain female Thirthankar (at least per Shvetambar tradition, Digambers hold that Mallinath was born male). Mallinath is the 19th Thirthankar of both sects, and Shvetambars hold that she is a woman only as a result of a minor (but benign) transgression; in a previous life Mallinath was King Mahabal, who, after agreeing to do a fast with his friends, engaged in an extra fast in secret. As a result of this deceit, King Mahabal was reborn as a woman in the next life. Mallinath then went on to become liberated as the result of serious asceticism and deep faith.[16]

[15] Ibid., 11.
[16] Ibid., 2.

When conducting field interviews, however, Sethi noticed that not a single woman gave Mallinath as a source of inspiration -- a fact that appears initially confusing, given Mallinath's unique place as the only female to achieve the highest spiritual designation given to an agent in Jainism. The question now is how to account for this. Sethi does so by arguing that Mallinath's liberation was *ashcharya* -- an unrepeatable wonder likely never to occur again. As a result, the story of Mallinath as a moral guide isn't as useful to Jain women (especially laywomen) as the stories of *jinamatas* and *mahasatis*.[17] This works well in conjunction with Balbir's argument that Mallinath's woman-status is ambivalent, even in Shvetambar stories. Mallinath chooses the ascetic life-style shortly after teaching her tutors the true nature of the body and soul -- as such, she enters asceticism without ever engaging with the actions that typically construct womanhood (marriage, child-rearing, etc.).[18] As a result, Mallinath as a spiritual idol is not distinct from the the other Thirthankars and doesn't maintain uniquely feminine characteristics.

On a theoretical basis, this understanding of Mallinath as non-distinct from other Thirthankars also appears supported by the Jain conception of gender. Briefly, Jainism rejects Brahmanical and Buddhist conceptions of gender by making a distinction between *dravyalinga* (biological sex, marked by sex characteristics) and *bhavalinga* (psychic characteristics of gender, including sexual preference). And, these conceptions of sex and gender are completely distinct; they are said to be brought on by two different types of karma. As a result, it is insufficient to observe simply biological markers as a basis for gender.[19] Because a person's acted psychic

---

[17] Ibid., 11.
[18] "Women and Jainism in India." *Women in Indian Religions*, by Nalini Balbir and Arvind Sharma, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 70–107.
[19] Zwilling, Leonard, and Michael J. Sweet. "'Like a City Ablaze': The Third Sex and the Creation of Sexuality in Jain Religious Literature." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 6, no. 3, Jan. 1996, pp. 359–384.

orientation is given a much higher premium under this model, a natural explanation for Mallinath's absence as a female icon arises. Namely, Mallinath, as a Thirthankar, has disentangled herself from physical trappings of her body. In a heightened spiritual stage, Mallinath has transcended notions of 'man' or 'woman'.

Jain Practice

After having moved through the theoretical considerations of Jain mythology and philosophy and their implications on Jain women, we can now start to consider more practical impulses in the lives of Jain women. The analysis will include an overview of class and how it relates to markers of equality, property rights, and the *sangh* and its hierarchy for mendicants.

Jains in Merchant Classes

One of the largest markers of gender parity in Jainism are high female literacy rates; in the last Indian census, Jains earned the distinction of the highest female literacy rates (92.91% compared to a national average of 64.63%).[20] The most natural argument to explain high Jain gender parity (and, perhaps more pointedly, high female literacy rates) would be that Jains are much more likely to be middle to high class.[21] Indeed, education and literacy rates do seem to be directly correlated with economic power because more affluent families place higher premiums on education and can afford to educate their children, so it follows Jains should have very high literacy rates in general.[22]

---

[20] Ibid., 3.

[21] International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2017. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16: India. Mumbai: IIPS, p.31.

[22] Hickey, M. Gail, and Mary Stratton. "Schooling in India: Effects of Gender and Caste."*scholarlypartnershipsedu*, Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, Jan. 2007.

However, Jains in particular are also disproportionately concentrated in merchant classes, likely as a result of merchant patronage and the prohibition of other occupations which may be more violent (i.e., occupations dealing excessively with fire or water, occupations dealing with the destruction of small beings and plant lives, etc.).[23,24] And, as scholars have already shown, high class standing may not always be directly correlated with high gender parity for the merchant classes -- whether it comes as a result of stricter societal expectations or other pressures entirely, middle-high merchant class attitudes towards women have historically been more conservative.[25,26] So, this merchant conservatism becomes a confounding variable in parsing apart this economic argument.

Karnataka, the state with the 5th largest Jain population, has only about 50% of its Jain population in business/trader industries. However, its male-female literacy gap (9%) is larger than states with higher merchant populations (i.e. Gujarat has 96% of population in merchant industries, MF literacy gap of 2%; Maharashtra has a 82% of population in merchant industries, MF literacy gap of 3%).[27] If concentration in merchant classes were exerting a significant downward pressure on female literacy rates, we would expect opposite results to hold true. As a result, we can conject that merchant class standings play a less relevant role in determining female literacy rates than general class standing does.

---

[23] "Jainism." *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, The Gale Group, 2005.
[24] "The Lay Person." *The Jains*, by Paul Dundas, Psychology Press, 2002, pp. 189–190.
[25] Iyer, Gopalkrishnan R. "The Impact of Religion and Reputation in the Organization of Indian Merchant Communities." *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1999, pp. 102–121.
[26] "Different Types of History." *Different Types of History*, by Bharati Ray, Pearson Education India, 2009, p. 373.
[27] Ibid., 3.

However, a more rigorous statistical analysis that takes concentration in the merchant classes into account remains to be conducted for the Jain community, so these conclusions should be understood as highly preliminary.

Property Rights

Given the rich and storied history of so many of India's traditions, Indian courts since the time of the British Raj have made concessions on the basis of religious and communal laws.[28] In 1955, the Indian government subsumed Jain law under Hindu law[29], so in an official capacity, it is difficult to observe impacts of Jain law in contrast with other religious law systems. Since 1955, unreported cases from lower courts and private familial agreements appear to be the main impacts Jain law has had on Jain communities, as filing special cases to be recognized under Jain law is time and resource intensive.[30] Because we can't explicitly measure unreported cases and private familial agreements, it will have to suffice to do an analysis of Jain law as a marker of gender parity in and of itself. Note that this analysis is based off property rights before 1955.

There were two major differences between the Hindu and Jain law systems. First, the daughter in a Jain family was entitled inheritance upon her father's death (though it was not usually equal to the shares of the brothers). This is in contrast with no mandated inheritance for daughters in Hindu law; patrimony was only extended towards male heirs. Second, on the death of a husband with no son, the Jain widow takes absolute control of the inheritance. Further, even if there is a son, she is an absolute owner of the inheritance. This is the largest difference

---

[28] Carroll, Lucy, et al. "Law, Custom and Statutory Hindu Reform: The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856." *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*, vol. 1, 2007.

[29] This was a decision with much controversy attached to it. For readers interested in more details, *The Jain Law* by Champat Rai Jain was a very important argumentative and historical text in the subject.

[30] "Jaina Law as an Unofficial Legal System." *Studies in Jaina History and Culture: Disputes and Dialogues*, by Peter Flügel, Routledge, 2006.

between the Jain and Hindu law systems. With the death of the husband, all of the estate goes to the son in the Hindu system.[31,32] The primary reason for this is given to be the concept of *pindadana*: because the son is responsible for giving oblations to his forefathers, he is responsible for the honor of the family in Hindu philosophy. However, the son's actions have no impact on the father's soul after his death in Jain philosophy, because *karma* (the generator of life's conditions in Jainism) is earned individually.[33] So, as Jain and Hindu laws were fashioned, they centered the son differently -- this resulted in especially divergent conclusions in the case of property rights.

Sangh

Perhaps the first thing to note is that nuns are recognized in the *sangh*; gender does not seem to have been an issue for Jainism in terms of the creation of a female order. And, in terms of the size ratio between the male and female orders, that also has had a historical continuity: female mendicants far outnumber the numbers of male mendicants in the Jain *sangh*. Since before the time of Mahavir, the number of *sadhvis* has always been written to be more than double the number of *sadhus*; modern censuses give the numbers to be 2,572 male mendicants and 8,946 female mendicants.[34] However, this lopsided ratio has not translated into a more egalitarian mendicant hierarchy over the years.

The first restrictions put specifically on female mendicants are restrictions of action: nuns are not allowed to be alone, to travel alone, or stand in *kayotsarg* (meditative posture).[35] In

---

[31] "Marriage and Position of Woman." *Jaina Community: A Social Survey*, by Vilas Adinath Sangave, Popular Prakashan, 1980.
[32] Jain, Prakash Chand. "Women's Property Rights Under Traditional Hindu Law and the Hindu Succession Act." *Journal of the Indian Law Institute*, vol. 45, no. 3, July 2003, pp. 509–536.
[33] Ibid., 31.
[34] From Jain Samagra Caturmas Suchi (1998) cited in Balbir, 'Women in Jainism', 88.
[35] Schubring, Walther. *Brhat-Kalpasutra 5.15-21 Translation*. 1977, pp. 31-55.

addition to this are also structural restrictions; nuns are often subordinate to monks, even if the monks have had shorter religious lives. Nuns have historically never been allowed to be the heads of the Jain *sangh* (Acharya) and have never held titles like *suri* (honorable). Most of these restrictions are given in the *Cheda-sutras* (scriptures of conduct), but Balbir's analysis of the justifications in these scriptures tells us that most prohibitions arise from the belief that women are more fragile and vulnerable, especially in the context of chastity.[36] So, while parity between Jain monks and nuns has outpaced much of India's contemporary traditions, existing domestic and societal patriarchal structures are reproduced in the relationships between *sadhus* and *sadhvis* as well as the restrictions placed on *sadhvis* from scripture.

Conclusion

After analyzing the lay and ascetic domains of Jainism from economic, historical, and social lenses, a few conclusions seem clear. First, Jainism affords woman a significantly higher degree of parity than its contemporaries. This most obviously manifests itself in markers of parity like high female literacy rates, positive male to female mendicant ratios, and widow and daughter property rights. Second, Jainism continues to struggle with the patriarchal backdrop from which it has come out of. Much of scripture and mythology takes for granted a characterization of women as sexual objects, and this results in both restrictions on Jain nuns and the tacit affirmation of existing cultural narratives. This negotiation between philosophy and culture is one that Jainism has and will continue to have to mediate, but the dynamic and

[36] Ibid., 18.

recursive nature of culture creation gives us hope that Jainism can go farther with the tradition of gender parity it has upheld.