

# Women and enlightenment within the jain religion

[Religion](#)



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Jain religion is of Indian orientation and involves rediscovering the Dharma, which is a person's virtuous path or righteous duty. Dharma is a concept used when explaining ultimate reality or higher truth in the universe. Jains are people who follow Tirthankaras' teachings, and there are twenty four special Jinas. The Jain religion inspires people to be spiritually developed through enhancing their self control and personal wisdom. The main goal of this religion is to realize the true nature of the soul. There are three gems to Jainism, and they are the conduct, knowledge as well as the right and true perception.

Jainism aims at liberating the followers from universal cycles of birth and death. The liberated followers are called siddha, and the ones struggling to be liberated are called samsarin. The samsarins have to follow teachings of Jinas in order to become siddha, through attaining Moksha, which is the liberation from karma. Jainism teaches that Dharma and the Universe have no ending and beginning but encounters cyclical changes. The worldly soul (samsarin) is seen to take various forms that include plant and animal form, human being, hell being and deity.

It is different from most religions due to the fact that it does not believe in God or a divine creator, destroyer or preserver. It believes that every soul has potential to be divine and that Siddhas who eliminate karmic bonding completely, are seen to either be close to or have achieved consciousness of God . History. The earliest documented leader of Jainism is Parshvanatha, who is said by scholars to have lived during the 9th Century. During the 6th Century, Vardhamana was regarded as a very influential Jainismteacher.

He had followers who followed his teachings and doctrines. They also interacted with him so that they could achieve enlightenment. His followers called him Jina, which refers to conqueror. Kalinga, which in the modern day is Orissa and Odisha, had many Jains who lived there. This faith was briefly disrupted by Mahapadma, who conquered the place and took Rishabhanatha's statue. However, Kharvela who was an emperor, conquered Magadha, taking the statue of Rishabhanatha. Udaygiri and Khandagiri caves are the only remnants of Jain monuments since the wood buildings were destroyed.

Jainism is a dominant philosophical, cultural, political and social force in Asia since civilization. It has influence in Hinduism and Buddhism since the ancient history. There is a close association between Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The connection between Buddhism and Jainism traces its roots to the origins of Buddhism, since Jainism was prevailing at the time . Hinduism on the other hand shares certain common philosophies with some Jain sects. Laity in Jainism performed roles that were very similar to those performed by monks including religious privileges and duties, which served to unite the two religions.

This ensured that they did not change for many centuries, though the fact that Buddhism had lesser demands for laymen, made it change several times. Jainism is one of smallest religions in the world since it has slightly over 10 million followers. However, the fact that these followers are distributed all over India, makes the religion significant. Other Jain communities are concentrated in United Kingdom, the United States, East Africa and Canada. Digambara and Svetambara traditions. The Jain sangha, <https://assignbuster.com/women-and-enlightenment-within-the-jain-religion/>

which encompasses monks, laymen and women, and nuns, is split between two major sects called the Digambara and the Svetambara sects.

It is believed by historians that the split occurred in 5th Century after the chief monk Bhadrabahu led over 10, 000 Digambara followers into South India after foreseeing famine. After a decade of being away, they returned and broke away from the Svetambara sect . However, there are minimal differences between the sects. Digambara monks believe that clothing leads to dependence on material possessions and therefore they do not wear them. On the other hand, Svetambara monks wear seamless white clothes, since Jain scripture does not forbid the use of clothing .

Jain organization. One of the factors that led to the existence of this community from the ancient to the modern times is its organization. Initially, there were four classes in society which were said to have originated from the arms, feet, thighs and mouth of Brahman, their creator. They were the Rajanya, Sudra, Vaisya and Brahman. The Brahman was the superior class of all the classes. These classes had different rules that governed each of them. The Brahmin class was given unusual importance and other classes were neglected, which made the classes develop rivalry.

There was also prevalent social discrimination and inequality due to the presence of these classes. This made Mahavira oppose the groupings and later Jaina Archaryas also joined in the opposition. Soon the society was divided into four groups, but based on activities that the people carried out. The four groups were; the male ascetics or Sadhus, the female ascetics or Sadhvis, the male laity or Shravakas and the female laity or Shravikas. These

groups have close relations and have similar religious vows that are applicable to them.

They made everyone have equal opportunities regardless of their birth or class and they were free to change classes with choice, unlike before. The people who wished to follow the religion while still living in households were referred to as sravikas and sravakas, if they were females and males respectively. Those who chose to leave the households and become ascetics were referred to as sadhvis and sadhus if they were females and males respectively. The classes emphasized on behavior modes and individual character and no one was degraded or neglected as they could do professions of their choice.

Women's religious emancipation. Before the introduction of Jainism, women were regarded as Sudras, the lowest social class. Women were barred from undertaking investment and initiation in religious passages. They were also seen to be irrelevant to religious threads which were sacred. According to passages of the past, people were discouraged from seeing women, dead bodies and Sudras among other things. This shows that they were taken to be a curse, which could be equated to a dead body. They were degraded and neglected by the society and they had no religious role to play in society.

Tirthankra Mahavira changed all this by treating females and males equally. Regarding religion, he made sure that the rules that regulated the conduct of both sexes were the same, and both had equal opportunities to practise religious duties, read sacred texts, practice penance, vratas among other practices. Women were also given equal chances with men regarding the

entrance to the ascetic order. He ensured that females were free to join the ascetic order regardless of whether candidates who were being admitted were aristocracy members, societal common run or royal consorts.

This led to many women joining the ascetic order. For instance, in Tirthankara the figures for sadhus and sadhvis were 14, 000 and 36, 000 respectively and those for Sravaks and Sravikas were 100, 000 and 300, 000 respectively. This shows that the number of women was more than that of men in cases of both ascetics and householders. This reflects the eagerness that women had in using the opportunity to learn about religion. In fact, Jydesta and Chandana both of who were queen Trisaladevi's younger sisters, Mahavira's mother and their uncle's wife, Yasasvati entered the Mahavira's ascetic order.

In the long run, Chandana became the female ascetic leader, which showed that women had an equal opportunity to make high achievements. Most of them became preachers and teachers due to these opportunities. Jain ascetism. Ascetism in Jainism involves renouncing possessions and materials. Jain ascetics do not also participate in any violence whatsoever. They do not hurt any insect or human and carry special brooms that brush off any insects that they encounter. Some even wear protection over their mouths so that they can avoid hurting insects or germs accidentally.

They do not also use devices, machines or electricity since they perceive it to be violence. Jain ascetics always travel barefoot, sleep on floors without coverings, and use certain platforms for sitting. These ascetics only eat vegetarian diet that does not include roots. Some ascetics meditate on hill

tops or around rivers according to the mental and physical limits of the ascetics. Jain ascetics are celibate and they do not share platforms or touch. They also move from place to place to prevent becoming attached to a particular place.

When ascetics feel that death is imminent, such as when having terminal illness or advanced ages, most of them prefer a detached and peaceful death where water, food and medicine are abandoned. Shvetambara and Digambara ascetics. The monks in Shvetambara sect solicit for alms from people in households and do not cook food. It is however important to note that they do not beg for it; they accept food only from people whose mind is pure and when such food is offered willingly and in the right manner. In such circumstances, the monks eat a measly amount while standing.

Monks and nuns in this cult only own a bowl used for collecting alms and eating, and white robes. Meanwhile, those in the Digambara sect eat one meal each day. The male monks in this sect walk nude and only carry soft brooms (pinchi), which are made from feathers of peacocks and a water jug. Nuns however dress in white robes. They also do not use utensils when eating, and they use their hands. Their belief teaches them that Mahavir was unmarried, unlike the Shvetambaras. Women enlightenment. Jainism to a large extent treated women using similar ethical codes as men.

The ethical codes used involve five virtues that speak against various vices. These codes are SATYA, which advocates for truth, AHIMSA which advocates for non-violence, ACHAURYA which advocates for non-stealing, APARIGRAH which advocates for non-possessiveness and BRAHMACHARYA which

advocates for the purity of the mind and body. These ethical codes are equally applicable for both men and women. Jainism taught both women and men to help each other and perform common roles. These roles were geared towards preserving the environment and improving welfare of mankind.

Both women and men were also responsible for their moral conduct. Due to the biological differences between women and men, together with society's gender stereotyping, roles for women and men differed in the cultural and social setup. This was not meant to be discriminatory, since Jainism viewed women and men equally in terms of concern for welfare of their families and children, and also in terms of playing of their roles. The inherent change in the patriarchal society does not undermine Jainism's view of equality between the sexes.

Jainism even had some nuns who were included in the religious practice, since the inception of this religion. However, some questions have been raised about equality between women and men regarding the issue of spirituality in Jainism. Some people of the view that there is inequality when it comes to spirituality, since women are hindered from growing spiritually and religiously due to the fact that they are female. Some people even went to the extent of perceiving women to be impure due to their femininity. Further evidence of this perception is given by the culture of the Digambara sect.

This sect does not believe that a woman can achieve Moksha, or liberation from Karma, during the same birth. This is explained by the fact that in the Digambara sect, asceticism requires one to be nude, which is impractical in



the real world as it would expose them to rape and attacks by men. This is also due to the fact that Jainism does not allow women to appear naked. There is also the belief that a woman cannot attain the level of siddha. This is because they are perceived to be unable to lead a true ascetic lifestyle since they are prohibited from being nude, yet Digambaras perceive clothing as worldly possessions.

The fact that women could not free themselves from the 'bondage' of clothing was perceived to mean that they could not be free of fear and shame that arose from their nakedness. Some women, in their quest to achieve enlightenment, are of the view that they should first move out of the female form. Thereafter, they should move towards the form of God after which they can take the male form. After attaining the male form, they can now be able to attain kaivalya. Inequality between male and female enlightenment.

Some scholars, are of the view that the real reason why women cannot achieve the highest level of enlightenment is not limited to their clothing. He says that in most religions, including the Digambaras sect, women are perceived to represent the transient and illusory material world (maya), that the religion seeks to renounce. This perception can be attributed to the fact that society has a form of gynophobia. The perception is also rooted to bodily processes and sexuality that that women experience, such as reproduction and menstruation.

In fact, Yuktiprabodha summarized the Digambar sect's view on the issue by saying that the female species have impure bodies, which is shown by

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menstruation, each month. They view menstruation as a form of destroying organisms which goes against their belief . The union of males and females is seen to also destroy organisms in female reproductive parts. Sexual intercourse is compared with insertion of a hot iron rod to a hollow tube which has sesame seeds, thereby destroying them. Another Jain ascetic, Rajcandra also said that everything that resides in the body of a woman is contemptuous.

He continued to say that pleasure derived from them is momentary and causes repeated excitement and exhaustion. Women are also viewed as temptations and snares for men who are in pursuit of spirituality. Another reason that women were not given the opportunity in the Digambarans sect lies with the fact that they viewed the role of women as restricted to household duties. This was viewed as the religious and moral duty of women. Actions of women are viewed as primarily to take care of the welfare of the household, husband, kin and assist him in performing duties to deities and ancestors.

For instance, the smritis and Dharmashastras believe that women attain salvation through performance of motherly and wifely duties. There is a further view that renunciation of these roles by women seeking to achieve Moksha would mean that the capacity of women to reproduce would be altered. This would disrupt sansara's normative order. These are reasons that made women nuns be given subordinate roles when compared with the monks. These practices are shared not only in Jainism but also in other religions like Buddhism.

Buddha was also reluctant to allow women to enter the samgha, and Buddhist literature portrayed nuns in negative light, in comparison to lay women. Generally, it is difficult for women to become enlightened since their bodies are perceived to be a focus of sexual desire and violence. Asceticism is thus taken to be masculine and defines retention of semen as one of its components. This is achieved through rigorous training and self control. In women, it is achieved through abstinence and fasting. Svembatara sect. Svetambara sect on the other hand believes that it is possible for women to achieve the level of Moksha.

This is supported by the fact that sadhus are allowed to wear clothing, which means that women are not discriminated against . Though some Svetambaras view women as inferior to them, most of them do not. In fact, Mallinath who was a Tirthankar was actually female, according to Svetambara, though Digambara perceive Mallinath as male. Other influential female religious leaders were Rishabha's mother Marudevi and Mahavira's mother Trishala. There have also been allegations that monks in both sects have lesser restrictions than nuns.

The role of women is however still significant, since evidence shows that the number of female ascetics is greater than that of males. There is also additional evidence that shows of other roles that they played, especially for lay-women. The lay-women for instance had important roles of transmitting values to their families. They also had the responsibility of preparation of food and offering it as alms to ascetics. They had a role to play in religion with evidence showing that they chanted and sung religious hymns. Finally, they used to narrate Jain stories to children. Conclusion.

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Jain religion has been seen to aim for spiritual growth through detachment from earthly possessions and living a life that helps mankind and protects the environment. Jainism has been seen to provide freedom to its followers to either leave their households and dedicate their lives to serving the religion or to undertake the same while doing their daily day to day activities. It has been seen to avoid violence to any being, both humans, animals or insects. Jainism has also been seen to be fair to all sexes, providing them with an equal opportunity to participate in religion regardless of their class in society.

However, the level of enlightenment for women in the two sects is slightly different. The main reason for this difference originates from material possessions and clothing. Digambarans have been seen to be particularly restrictive of women's participation in religion and their reach of the level of Moksha, since they perceive that the fact that they wear clothing is a hindrance to their attaining purity. This has also been seen to be an excuse for other underlying issues relating to the female bodies. Menstruation and reproduction have been seen to be a form of violence and desire that Jainism faith is against .

The perception that violence originates from bodies of women makes them unfit for achieving moksha. On the other hand, Svetambaras are seen to be more accommodating to women in religion, since they recognize that Jain teachings do not hinder anyone from wearing clothing. Other differences between the sects are seen to be minor, except the fact that they differ in the assertion that Mahavir was married and also the origins of his mother.

The two sects are seen to be similar in their detachment from earthly possessions and their commitment in the Jain teachings.

In my opinion, Jain faith as much as possible to be fair to women, and accord them equal chances to be ascetics, as men. However, the Digambarans are quite unfair to women, since the nature of their bodies is beyond their control. In menstruation makes women impure, questions can be raised on the body processes of removing waste, from both sexes. The Digambarans should be more accommodative to women and allow them too have a chance of attaining moksha, since every human being came from a woman's womb.