

**“Everybody Knows ‘She is Mataji:’” The Relationships of Jain *Sadhvis* as Instruments of Empowerment and Identity Formation**

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### Abstract

Both within and outside of South Asia, *sadhvis* are revered by Jain laypeople as paragons of the religion's ascetic imperative. Yet while some might conceive of these renunciant women as unaffected by the nexus of relationships and interpersonal interactions that flourish in the worldly realm, conversations with these women indicate that living alongside others informs a large part of their own identities. In this thesis, I argue that the relationships that *sadhvis* form with laypeople and mytho-historical figures are crucial in constructing their perceptions of themselves as empowered women. These relationships serve as affirmations of the *sadhvis*' agency and authority within their communities which in turn contributes to their satisfaction with their social positionality. Ultimately, I argue that the "selves" of these *sadhvis* are largely located in others. I primarily draw upon evidence gathered during my own ethnography of Jain ascetic women in Jaipur, India and in Iselin, New Jersey during the months of July 2015 and November 2015.

Through listening to the *sadhvis* words, one learns how *sadhvis* acquire a sense of agency and satisfaction through their ability to exercise authority over the lives of laypeople. Additionally, I argue that the relationships that *sadhvis* form with mytho-historical figures provide the *sadhvis* with models for empowered womanhood and allow them to reinterpret tradition in order to suit their own narratives as religious women. While neither of these relationships are without opportunities for challenges to the *sadhvis*' authority, they are mentioned by *sadhvis* as sources for constructing and reaffirming empowered selfhood. This study is in part an exercise in listening to the voices of collaborators as authoritative voices of their own experience, and resisting the urge to posit the practice of ethnography as an act of "reading" the supposed hidden thoughts and feelings of collaborators. Ultimately, this study demonstrates the importance of relationships as touchstones for religious and gendered identity among Jain ascetic women, and also posits a similar relationship between ethnographer and collaborator as essential to the practice of responsible ethnography.

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my collaborators: the *sadhvis* whom I interacted with during my research in both India and America. I am privileged to have encountered such amazing women in my life. Your influence on me extends far beyond the confines of this thesis.

## Introduction

Sitting cross-legged in front of Ganani Aryika Pragyamati Mataji, I felt intimidated by the Jain *sadhvi*'s<sup>1</sup> presence. Despite living a life of almost perpetual fasting, she was anything but frail. She did not smile at me, and I constantly felt the need to avert my gaze from her own, as I was too nervous to even make eye contact with her. The way she stared at me was hard and almost unfeeling.

After being petrified by Mataji's<sup>2</sup> commanding demeanor, my eyes were drawn upward toward the balcony above. Peering through the windows that separated the onlookers from the edge of the balcony was a group of Jain laywomen. Their eyes were wide and completely fixated on the *sadhvi*. They seemed pained by the distance between their own bodies and that of the ascetic woman below. I glanced at Mataji to see if she noticed the spectators looming above us, only to find that their faces had disappeared from view once my eyes wandered back towards the balcony. Suddenly, the entire group of laywomen appeared behind me, standing attentively at an invisible perimeter that seemed to demarcate access to Mataji. When the *sadhvi* finally invited them to sit at her feet, the laywomen's tense expressions immediately softened to smiles. Mataji's hardened appearance also started to unfurl as the devotees drew closer, her lips slightly curving upward as they each acknowledged her presence with a bow. The joy in the room was palpable.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sadhvis* are Jain ascetic women who take vows of *ahimsa* (nonviolence towards all beings), *satya* (telling the truth and refraining from lies), *asteya* (refraining from theft), *aparigraha* (refraining from possessions), and *brahmacarya* (refraining from sexual activity). An English equivalent to their vocation is “nun,” though they are quick to set themselves apart from the Christian nuns they encounter during their travels in India. Throughout the course of this thesis, I use the term *sadhvi* to refer to ascetic women in both the Shvetambar and Digambar Jain traditions, even though these two sects of Jainism have differential views on the role and status of ascetic women. These differences will be elaborated in more detail within the overview of Jain history.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to all *sadhvis* by their preferred titles. I add the honorific suffix “ji” to the end of the *sadhvi*'s name in order to echo the amount of respect that they receive within the Jain community. It should be noted that the title “Mataji” implies a connection to motherhood—one that is spiritual rather than biological.

It was this exchange between the *sadhvi* and the laywomen that framed the interpretation of my observations and conversations. Though Mataji's striking and austere demeanor initially suggested that she existed on a plane entirely separate from others, her interactions with these laywomen demonstrated the simultaneous coexistence of structures of hierarchy and intimacy within the relationships formed between Jain ascetics and devotees. The silent yet palpable communications between the *sadhvi* and the laity reflect other sites of connection found in the narratives she told me about her life, her religiosity, and her role as a female Jain ascetic. Her words suggested that much of her own perception of self was tied up in her interactions with others.

Similar elaborations on imperative of forming bonds with people in the community—both living and legendary—consistently resurfaced throughout the stories of other *sadhvis*. By examining the narratives of *sadhvis* encountered during my own ethnographic study alongside the narratives of *sadhvis* found within other ethnographic accounts, I argue that the relationships that the *sadhvis* form with laypeople and with mytho-historical<sup>3</sup> figures impacts the ascetics' perceptions of self by instilling them with a sense of empowerment. Given the status of Jain ascetics as paragons of religious practice, I argue that *sadhvis* gain empowerment from the authority they wield in their relationships with laypeople while also acknowledging that it is the layperson's adorations that support their renunciant capabilities. *Sadhvis* possess influence over the laypeople in their ability to evoke devotion from them and impact their lives through their spiritual guidance. The respect and care that is accrued to the *sadhvis* demonstrates the importance that they hold within their religious community. Ultimately, the relationships formed

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<sup>3</sup> I define a mytho-historical figure as a presence from the past who is simultaneously regarded as inhabiting a tangible space in lived history while also operating within a mythic context of idealized and emblematic action by members of a religious community.

between the ascetic and the lay communities provide the former with a perspective of self that I interpret as aligning with transnational feminist<sup>4</sup> definitions of what it means to be “empowered.”

The relationships that *sadhvis* form with mytho-historical figures similarly impact their perceptions of their agentive capacity within the community and satisfaction with their religious undertakings. These mytho-historical figures serve as precedents of female religious authority within Jainism. *Sadhvis* are able to assert their religious authority through the retelling and reinterpreting of stories of mytho-historical figures in order to highlight aspects of their lives or character that are conducive to maintaining the *sadhvi*'s own perception of herself as powerful. Thus the relationships formed with both mytho-historical figures and the laity are sites for the cultivation not only of spiritual selves, but also of empowered Jain womanhood.

#### *Thoughts on Defining Terms of Self and Empowerment*

Throughout this study, I attempt to model an ethnographic method for treating collaborators<sup>5</sup> as subjects rather than objects and acknowledging the agency of the collaborators to make choices both within and apart from the normative behaviors expected within their cultural contexts. I recognize that my collaborators are imbued with the same complex capacities as all other beings. Their perspectives are dynamic and their inner thoughts cannot always be read from their expressions or actions. I define “self” within parameters that acknowledge this complexity.

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<sup>4</sup> The term transnational feminism refers to a variant discourse of gender that examines the intersectional influences of gender and nationhood. It is critical of the universalizing tendencies of other forms of feminism that ignore intersectionality.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term “collaborators” to refer to the *sadhvis* that I encountered, interviewed, and observed during my study. I use this term as a means to acknowledge the reciprocal and dialectical relationships that I cultivated with these women.

Other ethnographers who collaborate with Jain women<sup>6</sup> adopt Talal Asad's critique against the common ethnographic practice of reading "outward signs" as "inward meanings."<sup>7</sup> I too draw upon Asad in my own approach to ethnography and studying the self. Asad argues that it has become the ethnographer's pursuit to decipher the inner self through what often becomes a game of reading the collaborator's supposedly deceptive actions as windows into the more secretive parts of their being. Asad locates the origin of such practice in the distinction made "between the real and the figurine. Unlike real things, the latter made statements whose essential meanings must be translated."<sup>8</sup> The "self" studied by the ethnographer is a product of the translations of the representational behaviors of the collaborator. This popular method of ethnographic interpretation is problematic because it establishes a binary of being of "inner" vs. "outer" that ignores the possibility of overlap. Instead, Asad suggests that the "inner" self should be viewed as operating in tandem with embodied, "outer" actions. The "self" must be taken at face value as an actor, a being that exists on both the inside and the outside *within* embodied actions.<sup>9</sup>

In the context of this study, it is fruitless to collapse the "inner" and the "outer" as one and the same. I observed many instances when Jain *sadhvis* and their lay followers would make explicit distinctions between their outer bodies and their inner souls as disparate entities. I encountered a particularly poignant example of this distinction while shadowing Mataji at a Jain temple. A Jain layman approached me and said only "my body is not my soul." He—and the other laymen around him—later explained that this distinction was essential for understanding

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Vallely and M. Whitney Kelting both mention Asad's critique as an important intervention within their own definitions of self and relationality in ethnography.

<sup>7</sup> Talal Asad, "Towards a Genealogy of the Concept of Ritual" in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 59.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>9</sup> Asad uses the terminology *habitus* to allude to such an act of training the body to become an idealized or desired vision of the self.

their religion. Many Jains encountered in other ethnographies also argued that there is indeed an inner soul (often called *jiva* within Jain philosophy) that is separate from states of the body. The dualism of body and inner soul (identified here as synonymous with self) is “considered neither a curse nor a condition to overcome, but a reality that is too often forgotten in the clamor of worldly life.”<sup>10</sup> To collapse the two would be antithetical to the Jain religious perception of worldly existence. Asad’s work remains crucial to this nuanced understanding of the distinction between body and soul because it argues that body and being continue to interact with one another despite this distinction. Instead of viewing the *sadhvis*’ as donning several personas that mask their inner character, I see their bodies as instruments that are used to cultivate an inner being that is simultaneously informed by and transcendent of the body. I adopt Asad’s view while acknowledging my collaborators’ sharp distinctions between the *jiva* and the body as separate categories of experience. The self, while superior to the body, can still manifest through the medium of perceivable action.

Saba Mahmood’s theory on studying selfhood is also important to my study because it places Asad’s definition of “self” at the crossroads of intersecting identities of religion and gender. Mahmood’s ethnography of the 1990’s women’s mosque movement in Egypt is vital to my own because it moves away from the tendency of feminist scholars to conceptualize the “female agent...[as] stand[ing] in for a sometimes repressed, sometimes active feminist conscious, articulated against the hegemonic male cultural norms of Arab Muslims societies.”<sup>11</sup> In this view, a woman can only “be herself” when she is rebelling against the patriarchy. Mahmood argues that such definitions of selfhood ignore the ways in which women embody

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Vallely, "These Hands Are Not for Henna" in *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers*, ed. Meena Khandelwal, Sondra L. Hausner, and Ann Grodzins Gold (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 225.

<sup>11</sup> Saba Mahmood, "Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject" in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 183.

selves through the fulfillment of non-subversive roles in society. Instead, she locates the self as linked to agency.

Mahmood's work is crucial to my argument because my collaborators often neither explicitly nor implicitly sought to overturn any gendered or cultural norms. While their agentic choices may be in line with patriarchal, gynophobic, or misogynistic practices, these actions do not indicate that they have no power in either constructing or realizing their being. I recognize the possibility for *sadhvis* to construct empowering perceptions of their roles and relationships in the Jain community by "borrowing extensively—if selectively—from the wider culture"<sup>12</sup> and the narratives of ideal religious and gendered performance that it projects. They conform to tradition and participate in its constant reconstruction. Their actions "do not serve as manipulable masks in a game of public presentation...[but] are critical markers of piety as well as the ineluctable means by which one trains itself to be pious."<sup>13</sup> The body is a tool used to express the inner being. The self is inseparable from the contexts which help to inform it. I argue that one must resist the urge to search for an inner self that is "free" from the constraints of the *sadhvis*' religious and cultural contexts. The self is always there and is always expressing its being through embodied actions which simultaneously inform and are informed by its surrounding milieu.

Thus I adapt my own definition of "self" to reflect the opinions of my collaborators while also incorporating certain aspects of Mahmood and Asad's theory. I define the self as a complex assemblage of identities informed by religion and culture that also has the agentic capacity to assign new significances to these established roles. It is not an inner part of a person to be uncovered or read, but a being that makes deliberate decisions in order to conform to and

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<sup>12</sup> R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 20.

<sup>13</sup> Mahmood, "Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject," 195.

reevaluate aspects of normative identities. The body is not collapsible with the self or its intentionality, but is an instrument through which the self manifests.

Relationships are also instruments in the development of self. Collaborators entered into and interacted within relationships in ways that allowed them to navigate identities, change their perceptions of their positionality, and inhabit religio-cultural norms. Like the body, relationships are more instrument than text. I do not assume that the outer actions that occur within relationships are shrouds that obscure an inner self which does not have the capacity to manifest to its fullest in a world governed by normative behaviors. Rather, I listen to the narratives of the *sadhvis* and observe their interactions with others as processes of navigating and creating their inner beings.

My encounters with these narratives indicate that the relationships that *sadhvis* form with laypeople and mytho-historical figures provide them with a sense of empowerment. However, to ascribe empowerment to another is an inherently problematic pursuit, as it can remove the agency of the collaborator and place all interpretive power in the hands of the ethnographer. Additionally, the parameters for what defines empowerment in feminist academic circles are heavily debated by transnational feminists who recognize that such a blanket definition can ignore the varying cultural contexts of power, gender performance, and selfhood. Often, “empowerment” becomes synonymous with Euroamerican<sup>14</sup> feminist ideals of individualism, economic independence, sexual liberalism, and direct opposition to normative gender roles.

In an effort to both accurately illustrate and repeat the emic categories and definitions found among my collaborators, I define empowerment in a way that does not impose hegemonic

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<sup>14</sup> I use the term “Euroamerican” to reference the white-centric academic and cultural climate found within the United States and in parts of Western Europe (the United Kingdom, France, Germany, etc.). I choose to use the term Euroamerican over the commonly used “Western” because it more specifically refers to a sector of culture found in European and American contexts. Additionally, it is less problematic in that it does not necessarily conform to a binary of “West” and “East.”

cultural ideals of Euroamerican feminism upon the narratives of my collaborators. Empowerment is defined as the explicit and implicit expression of satisfaction in either the replication of normative ideals of religious and gendered behavior or in their transgression. It is a feeling of fulfillment and satisfaction in one's pursuits, whether or not they conform to patriarchal or even misogynist norms of the religious or cultural community. Feelings of fulfillment and satisfaction are components to empowerment because they indicate that a woman has the capacity to make choices in her life that lead to her happiness—even if those choices are decisions to follow the status quo of behavior expected from a patriarchal culture.

My definition draws upon Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the limited definitions of empowerment put forth by Euroamerican feminist scholars. Mohanty argues that Euroamerican feminist scholarship often creates "a homogenous notion of the oppression of women as a group" that ignores intersections of racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious identity in favor of a narrative of domination by a patriarchy.<sup>15</sup> Third World Women<sup>16</sup> are cast as a "powerless' group often located as implicit victims of a particular socio-economic [and religio-cultural] systems."<sup>17</sup> Empowerment is ascribed to these women only when they manifest ideals of power that contradict these systems.<sup>18</sup> Mohanty suggests that ethnographies can avoid this trap only if they develop "a mode of local, political analysis which generates theoretical categories

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<sup>15</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" in *Feminist Review* 30 (1988):337.

<sup>16</sup> I interpret Mohanty's use of the term "Third World Women" to refer to women living in parts of the world considered underdeveloped, either officially or *de facto*. India and other parts of South Asia are included within this group.

<sup>17</sup> Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 338.

<sup>18</sup> Some of the *sadhvis* interviewed recognized this power differential. Samani Rohini Pragyaaji was especially adamant in her argument against a rhetoric that views cultural divisions of gendered roles as examples of subjugation, remarking how "we cannot put all the differences as 'these are differences' between women and men. Or 'this is how they're discriminated [against]'"—no, we cannot put every point of difference into the category of discrimination."

from *within* the situation and context being analyzed.”<sup>19</sup> The process of defining empowerment becomes an act of listening to the women themselves and situating empowerment in the context of Jain religio-cultural ideals. I interpret listening to the words of these women as acknowledging that their expressions of fulfillment and satisfaction are accurate representations and evaluations of their perceptions of their experience. Empowerment is thus also connected to agency, in that it entails a choice to not only pursue fulfillment, but also to define fulfillment. Recognizing empowerment begins first with allowing women the power to evaluate their own lives. To take that power away from them—to assume that their actions or words are shrouds that hide latent feelings of dissatisfaction and weakness—wrests control from the collaborator and renders them automatically disempowered in the seizure and manipulation of their story. Ethnography of empowerment requires a great deal of trust in the collaborator in order to ensure that empowerment is at all possible and that disempowerment does not start with the ethnographer. I trusted these *sadhvis* to share with me instances not only when they were happy and satisfied, but also when they faced challenges that made them feel less pleased and less in control of their positionality within their communities.<sup>20</sup>

### *Methodology*

Ever aware of the immense responsibility of the ethnographer, I sought to develop ethnographic methods that were both conducive to gathering accurate information and non-intrusive towards collaborators. The result of this process was a collection of life histories,

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<sup>19</sup> Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” 345.

<sup>20</sup> Some might argue that there is danger in placing too much trust in collaborators. To assume that whatever one says is an accurate reflection of their thoughts could ignore the complexity of human experience, as it denies the reality of tactic reveal and reinterpretation in conversation and reflection. However, I privilege operating from a place of trust in an effort not to deny these complexities, but to make the space to navigate them in constant dialogue with collaborators. I did not “read” collaborator comments as true or false without input.

opinions, and observations that proved invaluable to understanding the cultural climate of Jainism in North India and the lives experiences of the *sadhvis* interviewed.

During the months of July and November 2015, I interviewed nine *sadhvis*.<sup>21</sup> Because *sadhvis* do not possess easy access to cell phones<sup>22</sup> and Internet, I was able to locate most of my collaborators with the help of Jain laywomen and laymen residing in Jaipur. I located the two *sadhvis* visiting Iselin, New Jersey through the Jain Vishwa Bharati of North America's website. The length of each interview varied between 35-90 minutes.<sup>23</sup> Of the nine *sadhvis* interviewed, four were able to participate in a follow-up interview. Three of the *sadhvis* participated in individual interviews, while six of the *sadhvis* were interviewed in group settings of two and three. Translation services were necessary for all but three interviews. Jain laymen provided translation services without cost, their very involvement often remaining a surprise to me until arriving at the interview location. These services came in the form of oral translations of answers given orally by the collaborators, or written translations of the *sadhvi's* own words. One *sadhvi* wrote her responses to my questions in Hindi, which I later paid a language learning service to translate into English.

During these interviews, the *sadhvis* and I were never alone. I was accompanied not only by translators, but also by devotees who would tiptoe in and out of the *sadhvi's* presence, briefly bowing in reverence and eyeing me curiously from afar. Though the privacy of my interview process may have been compromised, I valued the devotee's religious prerogative to access the *sadhvis* for their own spiritual welfare. Additionally, observing interactions between the *sadhvis*

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<sup>21</sup> Details about the demographics of my collaborators are given in Appendix I.

<sup>22</sup> Acquiring a cell phone violates the Jain ascetic vow of forgoing possessions. However, I did see one *sadhvi* using a cell phone during one of our interviews. It is possible that this cell phone was a layperson's mobile that was loaned to the *sadhvi* during her time in Jaipur. I also witnessed other *sadhvis* utilizing the technology of laypeople in order to communicate with followers. Additionally, the two *samanis* interviewed in America had access to email and telephone.

<sup>23</sup> These interviews were semi-structured informal discussions that followed an interview guide approved by Bryn Mawr College's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

and the laypeople allowed me to see how these women were viewed by their communities and witness the contours of individual relationships between *sadhvis* and laypeople.

I was privileged to have access to the Jain community because of the kindness of my collaborators. As a participant observer, I tried to repay this kindness by complying with Jain traditions. I attempted to embrace not only the actions and words of my collaborators, but I also sought to view the thoughts and beliefs of my collaborators as valid and worthy of approach without prior judgement. Developing this empathy helped to eliminate instances of “othering” in my interpretation. However, I am also aware of my place as an outsider in the Jain community. I approach my ethnography and its interpretation as an empathetic outsider, recognizing both my positionality and the potential for meaningful connections between researchers and collaborators.

### **A Brief Summary of Jain History and Religious Practice**

*“...You know in previous [times], there was only Jain religion. And only Jain community was there...So [other religious people] left Jain dharm and they became Buddh(ist), Muslim...so many communities were created. And their base is Jain dharm and they took some books and they mixed their own things and they are saying ‘it is my religion, it is my religious books...’”*—Ganini Aryika Pragyamati Mataji on the history of Jain religion and the origins of religious belief

Like many other indigenous South Asian religious traditions, it is impossible to chronologically pinpoint the founding of Jainism. Many scholars ascertain that the Jain tradition<sup>24</sup> was born during the reign of Vedic Brahmanism, an ancient belief system that is an ancestor to contemporary Hindu practice. From the 9th to the 5th century BCE, Indian religious and philosophical culture saw a rise in traditions that opposed the Brahmanical emphasis on

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<sup>24</sup> It is essential to acknowledge that both the terms “Jain” and “Jainism” are fairly modern terms applied to a tradition that did not historically conceptualize itself as an “ism” or as religion set apart from other South Asian traditions such as Vaishnava Hinduism. The terminology is in some respects an invention of Euroamerican scholars. However, it is important to use these terms within my study because my collaborators claim them as descriptors of their religious identities.

sacrifice and Vedic<sup>25</sup> authority. Jainism is but one of many anti-Brahmanical traditions that rose to prominence during this time period. However, Jainism is distinguished from the other anti-Brahmanical traditions (such as Buddhism) in its extreme emphasis on ascetic practice and its devotion to *ahimsa*.<sup>26</sup> These developments stood in stark contrast to the Vedic emphasis on locating religious authority and power within the Brahmin caste and slaughtering animals for sacrifice.

Whereas Vedic Brahmanism maintained that the practice of animal sacrifice was necessary for increasing the efficacy of their religious ceremonies, Jains argued that avoiding violence was the only way that practitioners could free themselves from the bondage of *karma*<sup>27</sup> and eventually escape the cycle of rebirth. *Ahimsa*, the avoidance of violence at all costs, continues to be a central tenet in Jainism, as Jains today continue to incorporate the philosophy of “*ahimsa paramo dharma* (‘nonviolence is the highest form of religious conduct’)”<sup>28,29</sup> within their mundane and spiritual lives. The prevention of harm towards all creatures—even microscopic entities—remains a primary concern for contemporary Jain ascetics. Jain laypeople follow the precepts of *ahimsa* by following a strict vegetarian diet. All of the Jains encountered during my studies in India characterized the religious community as entirely vegetarian. They often mentioned that any Jains who depart from this dietary norm are subject to scrutiny by their

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25 “Vedic” in this context refers to the Vedas, a corpus of sacred texts composed in ancient India from 1700 BCE onward. These texts were considered most sacred when orally recited, a practice limited to only members of the Brahmin priestly caste. Jains reject the Vedas as authoritative scriptures.

26 “*Ahimsa*” is often roughly translated as non-violence, though this English term does not necessarily encompass all of the intricacies of the Jain philosophical tenet. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the terms “*ahimsa*” and “nonviolence” interchangeably.

27 In Jain philosophy, *karma* is a physical substance that bonds to one’s soul and prevents the soul from floating upwards from the worldly realm and into the heavens. *Karma* is acquired through any sort of action, though it is most often acquired through passionate attachments to mundane objects and violent actions towards living beings.

28 Anne Valley, *Guardians of the Transcendent: An Ethnography of a Jain Ascetic Community* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 28.

29 This phrase was later adopted by Mohandas Gandhi in his movement for Indian independence, though his configuration of *ahimsa* as nonviolence differs greatly from that found in Jainism.

peers, and might be considered “only by birth Jain.”<sup>30</sup> These Jains differentiated the practice of Jainism from the ethnic identity of “Jain” based on the adherence to this strict diet of pure vegetarianism. Additionally, members of the Jain laity are expected to adopt vows of gradual abstention from material and worldly pleasures that, while not equal to the strenuous vows of the Jain ascetic, also mark them as vigilant devotees of the tradition’s ascetic values.<sup>31</sup> It is thus important to remember that (ideally) *all* Jains, regardless of their lay or ascetic status, undertake some sort of vows of abstention from food, sex, travel, or other ventures in order to mitigate the violence that one commits during one’s everyday life. The devotion to asceticism as a means to prevent *ahimsa* links both the ascetic and lay communities together as practitioners of the Jain tradition.

Because Jain identity is tied so closely to ascetic practice, Jains construct<sup>32</sup> their historical legacy with an emphasis on the ascetic community as the founders and propagators of the tradition. The history of the tradition is tied with the history of the *tirthankars*, 24 legendary South Asian figures who are exemplars of Jain asceticism and proper religious conduct. As the “ford-crossers” of the tradition, they have made accessible the path to enlightened omniscience (*kevala-jnana*), the ascension of the soul to a realm where it is “beyond all worldly pleasures and attains the bliss of liberation.”<sup>33</sup> Contemporary Jain ascetics attempt to emulate the *tirthankars* by following their established ascetic precepts, and lay Jains honor the *tirthankars* through

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<sup>30</sup> The vocal disapproval of non-vegetarian diets was encountered during one interview with a *sadhvi*, as well as during several interviews with Jain laywomen conducted during November 2014. These interviews with laity were conducted for a separate project entitled “FOOD AND IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG JAIN LAYWOMEN.” The resulting paper can be found at the following web address: [http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/1972/](http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1972/)

<sup>31</sup> Walther Schubring, *The Doctrine of the Jainas: Described after the Old Sources*, trans. Wolfgang Beurlen (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962), 297.

<sup>32</sup> Because Jains are a highly educated and literate group, they often become scholars of Jain religion and religious history. Many books on Jainism (in both Indic and non-Indic languages) are written by scholars from the Jain community. Because of their scholarly presence, Jains hold a great deal of power over how their traditions are disseminated and described to outsiders. This facet of modern Jain scholarship is later discussed in relation to the *sadhvis* relationships with mytho-historical figures.

<sup>33</sup> Umasvati, *That Which Is: Tattvartha Sutra*, trans. Nathmal Tatia (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 264.

temple devotion and reverence of their images.<sup>34</sup> The highest spiritual endeavor within Jainism is the pursuit of freedom from the reincarnation cycle of *samsara*, though many living Jains believe that such liberation is not possible in the current era of Jain history.<sup>35</sup> The *tirthankars*, however, previously achieved this liberated omniscience within their lives due to their devotion to the principle of *ahimsa* and their extreme ascetic practice.

While all of the Jain *tirthankars* are considered extremely important within the Jain tradition, two *tirthankars* are especially revered because of their chronological proximity to the modern era. Parshvanath (877-777 BCE) and Mahavir (599-537 BCE) are the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> *tirthankars*, respectively.<sup>36</sup> Ascetic women and men were both historically included within Jain orders, and both laypeople and ascetics were said to follow the *tirthankars* side-by-side as practitioners and propagators of the Jain tradition. Jain renunciants are expected to continue this ascetic legacy through their adoption of the *mahavrats*, the five great vows established by Mahavir that underlie ascetic practice. The *mahavrats* include *ahimsa* (nonviolence towards all beings), *satya* (telling the truth and refraining from lies), *asteya* (refraining from theft), *aparigraha* (refraining from possessions), and *brahmacarya* (refraining from all sexual activity).<sup>37</sup> Jain women who undertake these vows and subsequently lead a renunciant lifestyle are called *sadhvis*, a title which differentiates them from laypeople, who are not required to

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<sup>34</sup> Because the *tirthankars*' souls have ascended past this plane of existence, Jain philosophy indicates that they cannot be reached through prayer or offerings. However, Jains continue to engage with their images in a similar manner as to how Hindus might attempt to communicate with a deity. It is not uncommon to see lay Jains adoring images of the *tirthankars* and serving these images as if they were possessed by the souls of the legendary beings themselves. Much of this adoration intended for the supposedly absent *tirthankars* is also transferred towards the ascetic community.

<sup>35</sup> Jain texts posit that the universe cycles through stages of happiness and sorrow that determine the overall character of the time period and the spiritual adequacy of its people. The age of Jain history in which we now inhabit is a period of spiritual decline and unhappiness that prevents liberation. Jains who are ascetics in the present age hope to be reborn in another age in which liberation is possible.

<sup>36</sup> Parshvanath and Mahavir, like many of the other *tirthankars*, have several names within Jain literature and devotion. Throughout the course of this paper, I will refer to them only by these commonly used monikers for the sake of simplicity.

<sup>37</sup> Sherry Elizabeth Fohr, *Gender and Chastity: Female Jain Renouncers*, diss. U of Virginia, 2001 (Ann Arbor, MI: Bell & Howell Information and Learning, 2001), 20.

undertake these vows in the same degree.<sup>38</sup> *Sadhvis* are also expected to undertake *vihar*, a continuous practice of traveling that consists of walking barefoot across India and remaining in one location only during the monsoon season. These practices of abstinence are believed to aid the renunciant's soul in its quest towards ascending to the liberated realm by unburdening the *jiva* from the karmic accumulation that results from acts of violence, lying, theft, ownership, and sex. Jain *sadhvis* are thus expected to be vegetarian and to have no possessions aside from a few white *saris* and a broom to sweep insects out of harm's way while they are walking or sitting. These few possessions serve as visible religious symbols that indicate a woman's status as a Jain *sadhvi*, as well as her adherence to the other vows of nonviolence, honesty, and chastity.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, *sadhvis* are expected to refrain from accepting food that has been cooked specifically for them by laypeople and from using vehicular transportation, as such acts would imply that the *sadhvi* would be willingly complying in the violent and materialistic acts inherent in cooking and traveling by automobile. Laypeople are expected to honor these women as embodiments of the ideals of asceticism that have structured much of Jainism's history and identity as a distinct tradition.

### *Sect and Biological Sex*

Though female asceticism has been a well-documented tradition in Jainism since its founding, many Jains are divided on the ability of women to achieve liberation from *samsara*, the cycle of death and rebirth. This difference in opinion is characteristic of the divisions

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<sup>38</sup> A Jain layperson might undertake lesser versions of the aforementioned *mahavrats*. For example, a layperson might vow to renounce marital sex for a predetermined period of time. These vows are not undertaken to a similar extreme or for an indefinite amount of time by laypeople as they are by the *sadhvis*.

<sup>39</sup> The degree to which the *sadhvi* can follow the vow of *aparigraha* while also maintaining *brahmacarya* has been a controversial issue within Jain tradition. Jain ascetic women must wear clothes, and thus must own at least a few *saris*. This question of whether the possession of these clothes excludes women from the ascetic order has led to a division among Jains into two sects—Shvetambars and Digambars--that each approach the embodied performance of female asceticism differently. The differences and disagreements of these two sects, while relevant to the study of any *sadhvi*, cannot be discussed within the scope of this paper.

between the two major sects of Jainism, the Shvetambars and the Digambars. Between 300 BCE<sup>40</sup>-100 CE<sup>41</sup>, disagreements in ideology saw the split of the once-unified Jain tradition into these two factions. Of the several divisive issues<sup>42</sup> that instigated the separation of Shvetambars and Digambars into their two iterations, the two most relevant to my study are the prescription of nudity in asceticism by the Digambars and the recognition of women's ability to attain spiritual liberation by the Shvetambars. Shvetambars maintain that both men and women can achieve liberation from *samsara* while wearing clothes, as they do not view the possession of clothing as a barrier to ascetic practice. Digambars conceive of nudity as a facet of *aparigraha* (the vow of non-possession), as it forces ascetics to give up their possession of clothes. Therefore, it is a required part of full ascetic practice. Digambars believe that the inability of women to give up their possession of clothing prevents them from achieving liberation in their lifetimes. Women are barred from practicing nudity in both traditions because it is not "feasible"<sup>43</sup> as they would be at risk for sexual assault and would spark sexual desire among laymen and monks. Additionally, Digambars texts indicate that female bodies have physical flaws that make them unfit for liberation because their genitals, breasts, and navels of female bodies are thought to contain miniscule organisms that render women impure and as constantly causing violence towards these microscopic beings in their bodily functions.<sup>44</sup>

Because of their exclusion of women from the ascetic ideal of nudity and their stance on the female body, Digambar Jains only grant ascetic women partial ordination as renunciants.<sup>45</sup>

Digambar women are referred to as *aryikas*, a term which posits them as spiritual advanced

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<sup>40</sup> Tatia, *That Which Is*, xxxiii.

<sup>41</sup> Prakash C. Jain, *Jains in India and Abroad: A Sociological Introduction* (New Delhi: International School for Jain Studies, 2011), 7.

<sup>42</sup> For a more detailed examination of these differences, see Appendix II.

<sup>43</sup> Valley, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Fohr, *Gender and Chastity*, 74.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 36.

laypeople rather than ascetics.<sup>4647</sup> Despite their inferior status compared to male ascetics, *aryikas* are still treated with reverence among Digambar Jain laypeople. However, while Digambar *aryikas* still maintain a privileged position in the community, they are not believed to possess the spiritual prowess of their male counterparts. Shvetambar *sadhvis* undergo the same renunciant vows as Shvetambar monks and thus possess an equal amount of spiritual merit.

In addition to the differences found between Shvetambar and Digambar *sadhvis* are distinctions between ascetic women found within the Shvetambar sect. The Terapanthis<sup>48</sup>, a subsect of the Shvetambar tradition which rejects the worship of all images, employs a number of ascetic women to become *samanis*. *Samanis* are in most respects similar to other Shvetambar *sadhvis* in their vows, their dress, and their duties within the community. However, they differ from other *sadhvis* in that they are allowed to receive food explicitly prepared for them by the laity (and thus do not have to beg for alms) and they can travel by plane, train, car, bus, and boat.<sup>49</sup> Because their vows are slightly less stringent than other *sadhvis*, *samanis* can be found outside of India in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. *Samanis* are treated with an equal amount of respect as other *sadhvis*, and for some diasporic communities, they serve as one of the laity's integral ties to the ancient Jain tradition.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Though *aryikas* are different than Shvetambar *sadhvis* in their religious status, *Digambar* Jains often colloquially refer to them as *sadhvis*. The use of the term “*sadhvi*” within this paper reflects this conflation, and therefore encompasses both *Digambar* and Shvetambar ascetic women.

<sup>48</sup> Terapanthi Shvetambar Jainism was founded in 1760 in Rajasthan.

<sup>49</sup> Vallely, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 72.

### Authority in Ascetic-Laity Relationships

*“Yes. They treat us differently than other women... Because we are devoted to the loyal path of Lord Mahavir. And we are like the soldiers of Mahavir. And we have that uniform, the uniform of a soldier.”*—Sadhvi Kannak Prabha Shriji

As a religion with a cosmology and deontology structured around ascetic practice, both ascetic and lay Jains are expected to undertake different degrees of renunciatory vows. While recognized ascetics take on a strict form of practice that forbids nearly all material possessions, Jain laypeople are seen as also partaking in asceticism by following less severe vows and by entering into supportive and devotional relationships with those who undertake the five *mahavrats*. Through their patronage of *sadhvis*, lay Jains mitigate the spiritual harm that Jain *karma* philosophy suggests that they accrue through their everyday practice of reproduction, raising families, participating in the workforce, and owning property. Laypeople use the material wealth gained from their worldly ventures to supply the *sadhvis* with the means to renounce the world without fear for their wellbeing. Because of the importance of the ascetic as a conduit for spiritual liberation, lay people respect *sadhvis* as powerful figures within their community.

The theme of power as it manifests as authority recurred constantly within my interviews and observations. I argue that the *sadhvis* encountered throughout my ethnography and the ethnographies of other scholars of Jainism expressed an increased sense of empowerment because they viewed themselves as authoritative figures in their correspondences with Jain laypeople. They associate their authority within the community with their overall satisfaction with their lives, and thus their determination of their own empowerment. Possessing authority empowers the *sadhvis* because they identify this religious authority with a sense of fulfillment and happiness. I suggest that the *sadhvis* view themselves as authoritative figures because of the narratives of their religious and spiritual competency that they develop through the relationships

that they build with the adoring Jain laymen and women. I also argue that the *sadhvis*' perceptions of their religious authority and power in the community both conflict with and conform to expectations of women's gender performance expected by conservative and traditional sectors of Jain society.<sup>50</sup>

It is important to note that I use the term "authority"<sup>51</sup> to refer to one's agentic capacity to make decisions in one's own life and to sway the opinions and actions of others. Authority is connected to power in that power is what is acquired when one has the ability to influence others. *Sadhvis* have both authority and power because they have the agency to make choices that determine both their own lives and the lives of laity. In grounding my usage of authority in these terms, I also respond to Mohanty's criticism of the repeated victimization of Indian women. The *sadhvis* I interviewed are not victims or helpless, and they certainly do not perceive of themselves in this way. They possess the capability to express their agency and influence others—they possess authority within the community. They see themselves as active participants in the process of shaping their community.

Authority as agency is both socially ascribed and self-referential. The agentic capacity to influence the lives of laypeople is given by the laity themselves to the *sadhvis* as the ascetic women perform in ways that correspond to Jain ideals of religious behavior—following the *mahavrats* being among the foremost ways in which Jain ascetics perform their worth as the embodiment of such ideals. The logic follows that if the *sadhvis* "can tolerate the challenge of renunciation, subvert the logic of sexuality, or gain control over the clamoring desires of their

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<sup>50</sup> By "traditional Jain society," I refer to tenets and beliefs of Jainism passed on in Jain scriptures, commentaries, and folk traditions. It's important to note that these Jain ideals are not uniformly held by all adherents to the religion, but rather reflect trends in gendered expectations prominent in these texts.

<sup>51</sup> Given the religious connotations of "freedom" found in Jainism, I avoid using this term in my discussions of power and authority. The *sadhvis* interviewed conceptualized freedom as transcendence from all the fetters from worldly life; therefore no currently living being can be considered truly "free," no matter their power or influence.

bodies...they must be superhuman beings worthy of popular devotion.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, the laity listens attentively to their words and opinions as guides for their own lives because they recognize the authority endowed to the *sadhvis* in their embodiment of Jain ideals. Authority is also derived from one’s own sense of being authoritative. The admiration of others fuels a perception of self as in control and agentive, as “there is a direct relationship between communally recited [or encountered] narratives of personal experience and the formation of personal and religious identity.”<sup>53</sup> Interaction with the laity reaffirms the *sadhvi*’s perceptions of themselves as agentive and powerful presences within their communities; as other ethnographers of South Asian renunciation have observed, “the ways female renouncers participate in local communities can heighten a sense of their power, and the social and spiritual aspects of renunciant life are often intertwined in unexpected ways.”<sup>54</sup> These women then channel their confidence into their interactions with the laity. The *sadhvis*’ perceptions of their authority are substantiated by their ability to exert agency over others, which is in turn a product of their own inner feelings of confidence and contentment.

*Religious Authority: The Status of Sadhvis as Paragons of Spirituality*

While interviewing my collaborators, it became apparent that they often structured their narratives and their conceptions of self and world within the framework of Jain spiritual ideals. Their self-narratives were peppered with language commonly found in Jain religious discourse that references religious concepts such as *ahimsa* (nonviolence—sometimes also interpreted as the absence of violence), *karma*, or *moksh* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth). The *sadhvis* viewed the world as governed by these principles, and therefore often chose to describe their

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<sup>52</sup> Sondra L. Hausner and Meena Khandelwal, "Introduction: Women on Their Own" in *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers*, ed. Meena Khandelwal, Sondra L. Hausner, and Ann Grodzins Gold (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 26.

<sup>53</sup> Griffith, *God's Daughters*, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Hausner, "Introduction," 26.

identities as religious practitioners as central to their overall conception of self, even in relation to worldly communities such as the laity. While my translators (oftentimes Jain laymen) sometimes warned me that these answers were not in the vein of the sociological study that they assumed I pursued, I find these responses to be extremely telling of the ways in which *sadhvis* conceive of their being and acting in the world.

When I asked Samvar Bodhi Shriji<sup>55</sup> if becoming a *sadhvi* increased her self-confidence, her response was “yes...[because] I cannot die. This is the faith. Because the soul is immortal. *Atma*<sup>56</sup> is immortal. So there is no question of fear.” Her answer took me by surprise, as I had not initially imagined that her idea of fulfillment could be so intimately linked with the religious tenets of immortality and transcendence of the physical realm. But Bodhi Shriji’s answer indicates that for some *sadhvis*, empowerment is derived from such a conception of spirituality. She suggests that confidence and fulfillment arise when one embraces Jainism’s teachings on the everlasting quality of the self and the view that one’s being is indomitable in the face of death (and presumably, the physical harm that might accompany death). By linking this response with her undertaking of the renunciant path, Bodhi Shriji also suggests that becoming a *sadhvi* allowed her to realize this truth to its fullest, without obstruction or distraction, and that this undertaking enabled her to increase her self-worth.

Evidence for the increase in fulfillment gained from becoming a *sadhvi* is also found in other ethnographies of Jain ascetic women. During her ethnography of Jain *sadhvis* in North India, Manisha Sethi comments on how the *sadhvis* she spoke with constantly “suggested that

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<sup>55</sup> Both interviews with Samvar Bodhi Shriji and interviews with Sadhvi Kannak Prabha Shriji, Sadhvi Shuddha Bodhi Shriji, and Siddhodaya Shriji were translated from Hindi to English with the support of my thesis advisor, Professor Supriya Gandhi. Professor Gandhi listened to my recordings of these interviews and provided additional translations to that which my layman translator had previously given me.

<sup>56</sup> *Atma* is a term found in both Jain and Hindu religious thought. Scholars of South Asian religions have sometimes translated this term as “soul,” or the portion of the self which is connected to the universal force of *Brahman* and survives through the cycle of reincarnation. However, the term can also mean “self.”

the real reasons for renunciation were to be found on a loftier, spiritual plane....each of the [*sadhvis* she] interviewed initially placed their renunciation within the grid of Jain theory of bondage and liberation.”<sup>57</sup> Sethi describes how the *sadhvi* Shri Malu ji remarked that she decided to become an ascetic in order to escape the bondage of the physical world and ascend to the higher spiritual realm, remembering how her family had once told her that “mendicant life is the only one where one experiences no sorrow but only great happiness.”<sup>58</sup> Malu ji’s emphasis on her family’s appreciation of the ascetic life seems to be a reflection of her own preference for mendicancy as a pathway towards “great happiness.” While Sethi suggests that Malu ji’s narrative demonstrates the *sadhvis*’ revulsion for worldly life as a layperson, I instead suggest that this story of renunciation emphasizes the satisfaction that is gained from devoting oneself entirely to Jain religiosity and spirituality. Confidence and satisfaction are grounded in the *sadhvis*’ fixation on Jain religious thought as the central pursuit of their being.

The focus on spirituality is intimately tied to the *sadhvis*’ conceptions of their authority within their communities. The *sadhvis* I interviewed suggested that not only is there a focus on Jain spirituality within their own conceptions of fulfillment, but also within the conceptions of worth held by the laypeople that they interact with. When asked about how she perceived her experiences of traveling throughout India, *Sadhvi Bhavyanandshri* responded that “Indian culture deems a[n ascetic] equal to god. Hence, [it is a] very good experience.” *Bhavyanandshri* suggests that traveling is made an enjoyable experience for her because those she encounters treat her with the high respect accorded to one whom pursues the spiritual path. She implies that the Jain laity perceives the ascetic pursuit as imbuing *sadhvis* with a great amount of worth in their communities.

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<sup>57</sup> Manisha Sethi, *Escaping the World: Women Renouncers among Jains* (London: Routledge, 2012), 99.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 101.

Mataji suggested a similar sentiment during a latter conversation, as she implied that her appearance as an ascetic demarcated her from others and thus gave her a special status within her community. She proudly lifted up her *picchi* (a broom made of peacock feathers that is a symbol of Digambar Jain ascetics) and said “our culture is that and nobody can touch us and nobody can ask [to touch us]. Even [potential attackers are] afraid of religion, and our *picchi* is there.” Contrary to my initial assumptions, Mataji is not suggesting that potentially aggressive laypeople keep their distance from her because she might smack them with her broom. Rather, she implies that the laity recognizes that ascetics are not only worthy, but *powerful*, and that they must be respected because of their devout adherence to Jain practices and their heightened religiosity. They are endowed with an authority to change the course of the actions of others, which in turn influences their own perceptions of self as fulfilled and empowered beings.

Sadhvi Kannak Prabha Shriji also remarked upon the differential treatment of *sadhvis*, as she stated that laymen “treat us differently than other women...Because we are devoted to the loyal path of Lord Mahavir. And we are like the soldiers of Mahavir. And we have that uniform, the uniform of a soldier.” I interpret Prabha Shriji’s statement regarding the military character of the *sadhvis*’ appearances as linked to Jainism’s metaphoric language of piety as an aggressive military pursuit; the word “Jain” itself is derived from the term *jina*, which roughly translates to “victor,” and is used in this religious context to indicate one who has conquered the body and the cycle of rebirth<sup>59</sup> (such as the *tirthankars*). The evocation of military imagery also evokes a masculine violence which the *sadhvis* are paradoxically able to signify through their total embrace of non-violence. They reinterpret tradition to overturn conventions of social dynamics,

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<sup>59</sup> James Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation: Religion, Economy, and Society among the Jains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 3.

as the non-violent become the aggressive victors and the sexually restricted woman becomes empowered. Power is endowed to the *sadhvis* through the display of Jain piety.

A particularly poignant example of *sadhvis* gaining a sense of confidence and satisfaction from this power and authority is found in the *sadhvis*' pride in giving their *pravachans*. *Pravachan* is a lecture given by a Jain ascetic to a crowd of Jain laypeople or fellow ascetics. The lecture often explicates various aspects of Jain religion, philosophy, or practice, such as the nature of the *ahimsa* or *karma*. Mataji was particularly proud of her *pravachans*; she often told me that she was known for her speaking prowess and her ability to give lectures in several different languages. When asked about whether practicing asceticism gave her a sense of self confidence, Mataji responded that “[being a *sadhvi*] is nice, no? Because I got knowledge religious knowledge and I do *pravachan*, I teach. So I feel nice. And [I’m] gaining popular[ity]. [My] name is there. And very nice people come. So I feel nice. And it is nice.” The latter part of her answer puts an emphasis on her penchant for giving *pravachan* and the satisfaction that she gains when lay people listen to her lectures. She suggests that she feels fulfilled when laypeople ascribe her authority by listening to her lectures on religious belief and practice.

Indeed, the ritual of listening to Mataji’s *pravachan* is in many ways a method for lay people to reaffirm the respect and deference that they are expected to give to *sadhvis*. During the lectures, laypeople of both genders are separated to opposite sides of the room, while Mataji sits above them on a raised platform at the front of the lecture hall. Both sections sit cross-legged in order to avoid the grave disrespect of pointing their feet towards the ascetic, and the laypeople listen attentively to the words of the speaking *sadhvi*. After the *pravachan* ends, the laypeople approach the *sadhvi* and present her with offerings of rice, coconuts, and other traditional oblations common to Jain worship. They bow their heads and give the *sadhvi* the proper

greeting<sup>60</sup> as they approach, eager to get close to the ascetic and bask in her presence. Given the adoration that is offered to her throughout the sermon, it is evident why Mataji ascertains that giving *pravachans* imbues her with self-confidence. The laypeople are eagerly attuned to her every word and express gratitude for her wisdom. They value her authority and her guidance for the community.

Other ethnographers of Jain *sadhvis* also comment on the importance of *pravachan* in the *sadhvis*' relations with laypeople and remark how these lectures are occasions for *sadhvis* to gain respect from their devotees. In her extensive writings on Jain history and practice, N. Shanta pays particular attention to the practice of *pravachan*, which she defines as "public instruction."<sup>61</sup> She states that this practice is a customary part of the *sadhvis*' daily routines, occurring between sunrise and noon and substituted only occasionally with travel or study of sacred texts.<sup>62</sup> She remarks how the *sadhvis*' "have all the more [agency] to speak and to speak in no uncertain terms [about the subject of Jain religiosity] because they themselves are *anagari*<sup>63</sup>, perpetually on [a journey], possessing nothing."<sup>64</sup> Here, Shanta argues that the *sadhvis* have authority in their *pravachan* because of their ascetic lifestyle, and implies that this authority allows them the liberty to address and approve the spiritual practices of the laypeople. Sethi also comment on the ability that *sadhvis* have to express their authority through *pravachans* through the narrative of Aryika Chandramati, a Digambar *sadhvi* who Sethi describes as "attract[ing] huge crowds [with her *pravachans*] even during the weekdays. The *pravachan* concluded with her disciple...announcing the *niyama* (rule) for the day, which all householders in attendance

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<sup>60</sup> The designated ritual of respectfully greeting a *sadhvi* differs from Jain sect to sect. I most often encountered the greeting of "vandami *sadhvi*," which roughly translates to "I bow to *sadhvi*."

<sup>61</sup> N. Shanta, *The Unknown Pilgrims: The Voice of the Sadhvis: The History, Spirituality, and Life of the Jaina Women Ascetics* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1997), 477.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 476.

<sup>63</sup> Used in this context, I interpret *anagari* to translate as another term for *sadhvi*, as other resources of Jain practice translate it as such.

<sup>64</sup> Shanta, *The Unknown Pilgrims*, 552.

were expected to follow.”<sup>65</sup> These observations reflect an association of the *sadhvis’ pravachans* with spiritual authority and the ability to influence the lives of laity. I extend Shanta and Sethi’s investigations of the importance of *pravachan* in the *sadhvis’* lives to include its influence on the *sadhvis’* perceptions of themselves as a result of the religious control that they are able to assert in the lives of the laypeople. As Mataji previously remarked, giving *pravachan* is a means for *sadhvis* to gain a sense of satisfaction and power within their community that enables them to describe themselves as confident, agentive, and empowered because they have the “freedom” to comment on the affairs of the laypeople and influence others.

It must be noted that *pravachan* does not play a similar role throughout the lives of all *sadhvis*. The *sadhvi’s* prerogative to give *pravachans* appears to be a staunchly Digambar tradition, while Shvetambar *sadhvis* are encouraged to give *pravachan* only when no male monks are present to do so.<sup>66</sup> Yet even *sadhvis* who did not specifically allude to giving *pravachan* commented on their ability to express agency and power over laypeople in informal settings. Samani Satya Pragyaji commented on how laypeople often visited her to discuss their problems, stating that “I think the reason that [laity] are coming to me [is that] they want to get solution [for] their personal life, [for] their family life, how they can satisfy their desires, how they can minimize their desire....Because they are struggling [in this] position.” She suggests that laypeople reach out to her in times of need and seek her advice, an acknowledgement of the authority that Satya Pragyaji has to advise the community. Sethi writes of a similar phenomenon in her own ethnography, when she witnessed “householders...travel long distances to meet with [the *sadhvi*] to seek their advice and blessings before embarking on any important business or

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<sup>65</sup> Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 167.

<sup>66</sup> Sethi, *Escaping the World*, 168.

life cycle ritual.”<sup>67</sup> She echoes Satya Pragyaji’s observations of the ways in which the laity draw upon her as a source of guidance. Satya Pragyaji later expanded upon how she exercises her authority in matters of spiritual guidance, stating that “this is the place where everyone comes and share. Where he or she can make any mistake. And how we can make it purify. So every person comes, open themselves, and then try to purify it.” She suggests that she has a role in helping the layperson to purify themselves amend past mistakes. Satya Pragyaji’s comments are an expression of her spiritual authority and her agentic capacity to aid the layperson in their various struggles of faith, religious practice, and interpersonal relationships. I perceive this as an expression of empowerment because it suggests a sense of purpose and satisfaction in the *sadhvis*’ abilities to influence and aid others.

Some *sadhvis* recognized their interactions with laypeople as avenues not only to exercise influence over their devotees, but also to learn from them. Some *sadhvis* strive to establish a communicative relationship of teaching and learning with their lay visitors. Samani Rohini Pragyaji was especially quick to comment on the reciprocal nature of her interactions with laymen and women. When asked how she perceived her experience as a spiritual instructor for lay children, she stated that she felt “excellent...[because] they learn, we also learn. Both learn. And it’s not only, let me tell you counter, it’s not only [in the U.S.] that I feel this. If I go to a very small town of India, I feel this.” Aryika Gaurav Mati Sadhviji expressed a similar sentiment about her travels through India, stating that the experience of traveling allowed her to “interact with the different society of persons during *vihar* and experience the various taste of their culture, languages.” Both *sadhvis* describe how their positions of spiritual authority enable them to learn from others and experience other perspectives, and explain such experiences as moments of happiness. The reciprocal relationships that these *sadhvis* develop with their devotees are

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 175.

avenues of satisfaction that accompany their ascetic lifestyle. The many ways in which the spiritual authority of *sadhvis* manifests within their varied relationships with laypeople demonstrate how *sadhvis* can experience empowerment through these interactions with others, whether it is through monitoring and shaping the spiritual progress of their lay followers or through learning about the different lifestyles and interests of their devotees. In both instances, a *sadhvi*'s perception of self and place in the community is largely influenced by the reactions of others.

*Imperfect Equality: Challenging the Sadhvis' Authority*

Though *sadhvis* wield a great deal of authority among the laity, this power does not always go unchallenged. Challenges are sometimes posed by laymen who disagree with the *sadhvi* on matters of Jain history or spiritual practice. As ascetics, *sadhvis* are ascribed a higher position in the Jain spiritual hierarchy than laymen because they embody the ideals of nonviolence and removal from the worldly realm that are fundamental to Jain philosophy. However, I suggest that laymen sometimes attempt to assert their own authority over that of the *sadhvis* as they expect their relationships with these ascetic women to fit into patriarchal models of gender relations prescribed by Jain religious tradition. Just as many Jain laywomen are traditionally expected “to accept her position as a subordinate to her elder affinal relatives [such as her husband],”<sup>68</sup> Jain *sadhvis* are sometimes similarly expected to defer to the authority of older laymen. Not all Jain *sadhvis* (or Jain laywomen) are willing to conform to these subordinate roles, and not all Jain laymen expect women to act in such a way. However, an ideal of women's subservience remains a palpable trope within Jain scripture, literature, oral tales, and ethnographic accounts. Many Jain texts (especially those directed towards ascetic men) mark women as “of questionable morals” and thus hindrances to the pursuit of the ideal of

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<sup>68</sup> Kelting, *Heroic Wives*, 15.

asceticism.<sup>69</sup> These texts implicitly imply that a woman's religious authority is suspect, as she is associated with the fetters of sexuality rather than its transcendence.

During a conversation with Bodhi Shriji, Siddhodaya Shriji, and Shuddha Bodhi Shriji, I witnessed the *sadhvis'* authority explicitly and stubbornly challenged by Jain laymen.<sup>70</sup> I asked the *sadhvis* to tell me the story of Malli, whom many Shvetambar Jains believe to be the only female *tirthankar*. After Bodhi Shriji remarked on how Malli gave her confidence because she saw her as a female role model, one of the nearby laymen<sup>71</sup> raised an objection. He argued that Malli only became a *tirthankar* after her spiritual excellence allowed for her gender to change into that of a man, making her an essentially *male tirthankar*. His argument for this position consisted mostly of "it is written as such," which neither my (male) translator nor the *sadhvis* seemed to think was at all credible. After the layman's constant (and loud) insistence on his point, Bodhi Shriji and Siddhodaya Shriji jumped into this argument between my translator and the layman, mentioning that Malli's ability to become a *tirthankar* despite her female gender was an *ascarya*, an extraordinary religious event. The layman, however, refused to accept their explanation, and continued to argue rather vehemently with both the *sadhvis* and my translator. Other laymen also began to enter the conversation and supported the initial layman's position. The *sadhvis* clearly disapproved of the layman's argument, and Bodhi Shriji even clicked her tongue loudly at the laymen as a sign of disapproval. The entire conversation seemed to make her feel awkward, as she quietly asked me to change the topic with the next question.

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<sup>69</sup> Fohr, *Gender and Chastity*, 71.

<sup>70</sup> While I only once witnessed a direct challenge of the *sadhvis* authority by laymen, other ethnographies tell of more occasions in which laymen deny a *sadhvi's* authority. These challenges to authority sometimes take the form of attempted sexual coercion or assault. Valley pens a particularly interesting chapter on the frequent temptations of demons—who take the form of attractive men—faced by the *sadhvis*. She encountered at least one *sadhvi* who was possessed by a male demon that was overcome by the ascetic woman's great beauty. Valley argues that these possessions are manifestations of anxiety over the *sadhvi's* own sexuality and the threat of sexual coercion.

<sup>71</sup> As stated in a previous section, laypeople were a frequent presence throughout all of my interviews and encounters with the *sadhvis*.

This ordeal demonstrates the ways in which laymen can challenge the authority of the *sadhvis* despite their supposedly subordinate position in the Jain religious hierarchy. The laymen ignored the words of the *sadhvis* and preferred instead to direct their arguments and questions towards my male translator. When the *sadhvis* attempted to enter the conversation, their voices were drowned out by the shouting match of the men. Additionally, the content of their argument itself was a demonstration of male superiority because it concerned the ability (or lack thereof) of women to ascend to the highest spiritual status in Jainism. The laymen completely refused and ignored the *sadhvis*' justification for their perspectives on Malli in favor of their own understandings of Jain scripture. While the *sadhvis* position as ascetics would (theoretically) empower them to have the authority in a conversation on Jain religion and spirituality, I suggest that their voices were ignored by the laymen because of their gender. The laymen seemed to expect the *sadhvis* to conform to the performance of subservience expected from Jain laywomen in traditional conceptions of ideal gender relations.

Yet one cannot assume that Jain laymen are universally more disparaging of the authority of *sadhvis*. During my interview with Rohini Pragyaji and Satya Pragyaji, both women told me that there was no difference in how they approached relationships with laypeople of either gender. Rohini Pragyaji described how she didn't "have to tell Jains" to come visit her and seek her wisdom, no matter their gender. Boys and men were just as happy to be in her presence as girls and women. Satya Pragyaji agreed, adding that visitation "differs from person to person....here are many people [coming], some females are coming but males are not coming, [and] some males are coming but the wives are not coming. Each has their own interest." She ascribes the layperson's interaction with the *sadhvis* as based on interest in spiritual pursuits

rather than gender. The narratives of these two *samanis*<sup>72</sup> complicate assumptions that laymen are more likely to challenge a *sadhvi*'s authority as they deny that gendered perceptions of women's inferiority influence the frequency or ways in which the laity approaches the ascetic women. The diversity of the *sadhvis*' experiences prevents ethnographers from making any broad claims about the propensity of Jain laymen to challenge the authority of the *sadhvis*. Yet my observations also indicate that Jain patriarchal thought can influence the ways in which authority is ascribed to the *sadhvis* based on their gender. This denial of authority subsequently denies the *sadhvis* the ability to obtain empowerment in their agentive capacity to wield power over the laypeople.

### **Narratives of Past *Sadhvis* as Examples for Empowerment: Malli and Sita**

*“Be strong like Sitaji!”*—Aryika Gaurav Mati Sadhvi

As the aforementioned argument between the *sadhvis* and the laymen illustrates, mytho-historical figures continue to remain constant presences in Jain religion and practice. There is no shortage of stories of *sadhvis* within Jain literature and oral tradition, and multiple versions and variations of popular stories are common throughout both the written and the spoken word.<sup>73</sup> The importance of these narratives cannot be underestimated, as “Jain renouncers frequently use them to explain, illustrate, and encourage Jain praxis and morals. For Jains, these narratives are

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<sup>72</sup> It is important to note that this opinion was only explicitly expressed by the Terapanthi *samanis* interviewed in New Jersey. Though their statements reflect their experiences in both America *and* India, their narratives could differ from the norm in that they are operating in a religious and cultural context that differs slightly from non-Terapanthi Jain ascetics. The great deal of attention that this community has received since the publication of Valley's ethnography may have made them more aware of scholarly perceptions of *sadhvi*-laity relations. Previous conversations with an established ethnographer of Jain *sadhvis* suggest that this awareness leads them to talk about Jainism and their experiences in a way that other Jains might find unfamiliar.

<sup>73</sup> Given the scope of Jain literary and oral tradition, I do not address specific stories outside of Vimala Suri's *Jain Ramayana*. I rely on the oral narratives of the *sadhvis* to guide my study, as I assume that these personal retellings are most central to their lives and their understandings of self.

not just stories but descriptions of inspiring and historical events and people.”<sup>74</sup> The *sadhvis* build relationships with these figures by retelling and remembering these stories, as the narratives of these mytho-historical figures become intertwined with their narratives of self. During the interviews, some of these stories appeared during discussions of authority and satisfaction, as they were put forth as examples for present-day empowerment. Stories of mytho-historical figures are thus not just retellings of past events, but also meditations on the *sadhvis* own lives, as they see themselves as part of the lineage and persona that these figures leave behind.

The mytho-historical character Sita entered our conversations without prompting, and mentions of Malli also evoked stories of the past that the *sadhvis* claimed had bearing on the present. The impact that the narratives of Malli and Sita have on the *sadhvis* demonstrates how *sadhvis* conceive of power within their gendered and religious contexts. Though these figures exist in a mythological space, “it is significant that [they] remain fully human, and they are understood to be historical personages, because their humanity allows the possibility of correction imitation by contemporary humans.”<sup>75</sup> Similarly, their humanity also allows for the establishment of an interpersonal relationship between the past and present, the living and the legendary.

Additionally, the ability of the *sadhvis* to reshape these narratives themselves demonstrates the authority that they wield within the Jain community. The *sadhvis* are active participants in the molding of Jain religiosity through their retelling of these stories. The varying emphases that they put on various aspects of Malli and Sita’s narratives highlights specific parts of these narratives that *sadhvis* wish to propagate in their own lives, such as the recognition of

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<sup>74</sup> Fohr, *Gender and Chastity*, 17.

<sup>75</sup> Kelting, *Heroic Wives*, 103.

the spiritual worth of women or the relationship between keeping vows and obtaining spiritual power. The *sadhvis* demonstrate their authority in the ability to establish a “multiplicity of construction [of tradition] that...is the primary source for the variation in performativity that is the hallmark of agency.”<sup>76</sup>

*Malli: The Female Tirthankar*

As previously discussed, the story of Malli is an extraordinary example for Jain religious women. Shvetambar Jains believe that the 19th *tirthankar* Malli (also known as Mallinath, though the suffix “nath” implies maleness<sup>77</sup>) was a woman.<sup>78</sup> As a *tirthankar*, Malli reached the highest level of Jain ascetic practice and achieved liberation from the cycle of reincarnation upon her death. The belief in a female *tirthankar* allows for the ascription of mythical legitimacy to the practice of female renunciation among the Shvetambar Jain community because it serves as a reminder of the soul’s ability to ascend to the pinnacle of religious practice even within a female body. The legend of Malli is an important inspiration to present-day *sadhvis*, who conceptualize their positionality as ascetic women on the path towards spiritual perfection through the use of such legends of past female ascetics.

Many of the *sadhvis* interviewed were able to recount small snippets of the legend of Malli, indicating that the narrative holds some importance to their own religious practice. Bhavyanandshri remembers her as “the princess of Mithila. In the sequence of 24 *tirthankars*, she was positioned 19th. She expanded the religion instituted by Lord Rishabhdev [the first *tirthankar*].” A princess of great beauty, Malli renounced the world at a young age, as she was

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<sup>76</sup> Edwina Barvosa-Carter, "Strange Tempest: Agency, Poststructuralism, and the Shape of Feminist Politics to Come" in *Butler Matters: Judith Butler's Impact on Feminist and Queer Studies*, ed. Margaret Sönsner Breen and Warren J. Blumenfeld (Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2005), 179.

<sup>77</sup> Shanta, *The Unknown Pilgrims*, 73.

<sup>78</sup> Digambar Jains maintain that Mallinath was born in a male body, and that no *tirthankar* has ever been a woman.

“disgusted to be regarded as a sexual object” by the princes that sought her hand in marriage,<sup>79</sup> and she instead adopted the lifestyle of an ascetic. Soon after her renunciation, Malli gained *kevala-jnana*. A few of the *sadhvis* interviewed mentioned other key details of Malli’s story that set her apart from the other *tirthankars* of Jainism. Siddhodaya Shriji made note of how Malli provided special spiritual opportunities for women:

“All the tirthnakars are male but Mallinath. And after getting omniscience, every *tirthankar* [has a celebration] in a *samosaran*, and that is a special place where they preach. So in the *samosaran* for all *tirthankars*, males sit in the front, and females sit in the back. In case of Maillinath, females were sitting in the front, and males in the back.”

Siddhodaya Shriji remembers the gendered nature of Malli’s ascension to *kevala-jnana* and indicates that Malli’s story holds significance for women because of her rearrangement of traditional Jain gender roles, as she privileged women over men. Despite this, Siddhodaya Shriji also stated that she didn’t “feel any special connection with [Malli] because all 24 *tirthankars* are same for [her]. So nothing special about Malli.”<sup>80</sup>

However, Siddhodaya Shriji’s contemporary, Bodhi Shriji, disagreed with her on the significance of Malli as an inspiration for her spiritual life as a *sadhvi*. Bodhi Shriji commented on how the legend of Malli played a role in providing her with spiritual strength, and how she cultivated a special relationship with this particular *tirthankar*. She stated that because Malli was “a woman [and] she could [become a *tirthankar*], [she felt that] even we could do that. So this is a matter of confidence.” The story of the female *tirthankar* provides Bodhi Shriji with a sense of self-worth that is conducive to empowerment because the narrative gives precedence for her to make her own agentive choices in her pursuit of the spiritual path. It also instills her with a sense

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<sup>79</sup> Padmanabh S. Jain, *Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women* (Berkeley: U of California, 1991), 15.

<sup>80</sup> Rohini Pragayaji shared a similar view to Siddhodaya Shriji, but instead attributed her views to Malli’s lack of historicity. She stated that *tirthankars* like Mahavir, who can be located in a secular historical record, are easier to follow and revere because they have written teachings.

of satisfaction in her position as a religious woman because she is able to reinterpret Malli's narrative as an affirmation of her own capabilities as a renunciant woman. This legend inspires the *sadhvis* to act confidently and undertake spiritual endeavors that would otherwise seem inaccessible, just as Bodhi Shriji was inspired by the tale of Malli to strive towards *moksh*. The spiritual heritage of this *tirthankar* transcends time and has tangible effects for these women's senses of self because she confirms that their aspirations for fulfillment as ascetic women are possible and have a historical precedent. The representation of Malli as a Jain woman who achieves the highest level of religious authority matters to present-day *sadhvis* because they can draw a sense of empowerment from these stories in their affirmation of their pursuit as ascetic women, as they feel satisfied and confident in their choices to undertake the ascetic path.

Malli's importance to the practices of the *sadhvis* stems not only from her spiritual worth, but also from her explicitly gendered performance as a pious Jain woman. During another interview, a *sadhvi* alluded to a popular narrative of Malli that demonstrated her ability to perfectly embody the ideal of chastity so important for the cultivation of power by Jain *sadhvis*. When I asked her about the story of Malli, Satya Pragyaji directed me to a narrative in one of her readings concerning Malli's deflection of the sexual advances of several princes who wished for her hand in marriage. She recalled how Malli "prepared [the princes] to initiation" by inviting them to view a statue which she had filled with rotting food. Malli reminded the princes that this statue represented the body, as its beautiful exterior hid a putrid interior. Inspired by her wisdom, the princes became Jain ascetics, and Malli avoided marriage.

This narrative demonstrates how Malli performs an ideal of chastity in her rejection of marriage and sex, and how this performance of chastity protects her from losing the power that Jain ascetic women gain from their vows of *brahmacarya*. Satya Pragyaji's recollection of this

story as one of the most important facets of Malli's character demonstrates that the image of Malli as a deflector of sexual activity is essential to her memory. Her chastity is most important because she is a woman, as Jain women are expected to undertake vows of chastity with more ease and perfection than Jain men—even Jain monks.<sup>81</sup> Malli's attempts to dissuade the princes' advances demonstrate how the ideal ascetic Jain woman can (and should) go to any length to prevent the violation of her chastity, which could destroy her understanding of herself as a *sadhvi*.<sup>82</sup> Malli's narrative also demonstrates how the preservation of chastity is a locus of the Jain woman's power, as she displays her agency to retain her unmarried status through the evocation of *brahmacarya*. Her embodiment of chastity similarly allows her to retain agency over the actions of laymen, as she is able to convince them to renounce and become ascetics despite their sexual urges. Satya Pragyaji's retelling of this narrative indicates how Malli models chastity as an essential virtue and as a means for empowerment because her story demonstrates how obtaining authority and spiritual worth goes hand-in-hand with practicing *brahmacarya*.

Despite the potential for Malli's narrative to demonstrate a mode of empowerment, it is important to note that the legend of Malli contains several elements that could be interpreted as disparaging towards women. Shvetambars maintain that Malli's gender was the result of her treachery in a past life. As the male ascetic Mahabala, Malli's prior incarnation broke a promise to his fellow monks by practicing an extraordinary amount of *tapas*.<sup>83</sup> While Mahabala's devotion to Jainism was great, his deceit ensured karmic punishment. He was granted the status of a *tirthankar* in his next life at the price of being reborn in a woman's body. The legend of Malli's prior incarnation serves to connect female bodies with inferiority and treachery.

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<sup>81</sup> Fohr, *Gender and Chastity*, 66.

<sup>82</sup> Fohr mentions how some of her *sadhvi* collaborators indicated that the forcible breaking of vows of chastity through rape was one of the few legitimate reasons for a *sadhvi* to commit the self-violence suicide, indicating how devastating such an attack is viewed within this community.

<sup>83</sup> Fohr, *Gender and Chastity*, 76.

Other aspects of the Shvetambar Malli legend also indicate that her gender as is couched with an affirmation of the inferiority of women. Some stories of Malli explain how her gender became masculine once she achieved the status of *arhat*.<sup>84</sup> Her female body disappeared, and she adopted a masculine form that allowed her to proceed into *moksh*. Malli's gender change seems to be confirmed by various works of Shvetambar devotional art that represent her as a male. Shvetambar depictions of Malli as male have been prevalent since at least 1180 CE<sup>85</sup>, indicating that they have an established presence within the *Shvetambar* tradition for at least a thousand years. The propensity to depict Malli as a male among Jains may indicate disdain for the female form within some parts of the religious tradition—a propensity most clearly illustrated by the argument between the *sadhvis* and a group of laymen mentioned in a previous section.

Despite these somewhat misogynist conventions within the Shvetambar tradition, the *sadhvis* indicated that Malli's status as a female *tirthankar* was still important to their positive constructions of Jainism and womanhood. Many of the *sadhvis* excluded these more misogynist elements from their retelling of Malli's story in order to cultivate a relationship with her persona that entirely endorsed their own pursuits as ascetic women. The *sadhvis*' strong assertion that Malli was indeed born a woman indicates the gendered ties that these ascetics have to this religious figure, despite the various elements of misogyny and gynophobia that pepper the legend of the female *tirthankar*. Malli's legacy is important to the *sadhvis* because it legitimizes the spiritual power of women within their religion. It sets an example that they can apply to their own lives as Jain ascetic women, and provides them with the confidence to pursue an ideal of renunciant religiosity. Affinity with the past is especially important in the Jain tradition because its religiosity “consists in an unwavering belief in the authenticity of life of these heroes and in

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<sup>84</sup> Walther Schubring, *The Doctrine of the Jainas*, trans. Wolfgang Beurlen (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962), 27.

<sup>85</sup> Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, 141.

concentration on their virtues and perfect along with a desire to endeavor to imitate them.”<sup>86</sup> The *sadhvis*’ perceptions of their own status as agentive and powerful women are drawn from the stories of those who have come before because Jainism places great emphasis on the admiration and emulation of mytho-historical figures. The legend of Malli, the unwaveringly devotional *sadhvi* who eventually became a *tirthankar*, is significant in that the *sadhvis* constructed their narratives as reaffirmations of their capacity for empowerment, as it establishes spirituality as a realm in which women can achieve equal status as men and obtain an immense amount of authority through their piety.

*Sita: The Sati and the Sadhvi*

While Mallinath’s example of empowered spirituality is important for Shvetambar *sadhvis*, another mytho-historical figure is equally important in conceptualizing Jain religiosity. While talking with Gaurav Mati Sadhvi, I asked her how I, a young woman, could deflect the male sexual attention. Her answer was simple: “be strong like Sitaji!” The *aryika*’s evocation of Sitaji is a reference to the story of the *Ramayana*. The narrative of Rama’s banishment has been passed down through Indian culture via the written word, oral tradition, live performance, and television serial. Often conceived as a Hindu legend, the Jain tradition possesses its own version of the *Ramayana* story. Jain retellings and commentaries on the *Ramayana* have inspired the religious community from 0 CE to the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>87</sup> The Jain *Ramayana* features the same basic plotline and cast of characters, but key differences in the presentation of these characters convey a greater focus on *ahimsa* and renunciation.

In the Jain *Ramayana*, prince Rama of Ayodhya is wrongly exiled from his kingdom alongside his brother Lakshmana and his wife Sita. While wandering in the forest, Sita is

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<sup>86</sup> Shanta, *The Unknown Pilgrims*, 79.

<sup>87</sup> Vimala Suri, *Jain Ramayana: Paumacaryu*, trans. Shantilal Nagar (Delhi: B.R. Pub, 2002), vii.

kidnapped by the demon king Ravana. He ceaselessly tries to woo her, but Sita continuously refuses him, thus maintaining her loyalty to her husband Rama. Rama eventually invades Ravana's kingdom of Lanka and retrieves his wife from the demon. Returning to Ayodhya, Ram and Sita rule the kingdom as ideal monarchs. However, when evil gossip casts Sita's resistance of Ravana's sexual advances into doubt, Rama banishes her to the forest. She manages to make her way to her uncle's city, gives birth to Rama's twins, and lives for many years as Rama's banished bride. After Sita proves her loyalty to Rama through surviving a literal trial-by-fire, the king asks her to return to him as his wife. She refuses, taking *diksha* and becoming one of Jainism's most venerated *sadhvis*. Sita dies in extreme virtue and ascends to the realm of the gods.

As the comment of Gaurav Mati Sadhvi demonstrates, what is often remembered from Sita's narrative is her ability to stave off sexual harm through her own resolve. She remains free from the influence of sexual coercion and violence "because of the firm discipline, [as] her mind remained unmoved."<sup>88</sup> This strength of character serves as her protection against the sexual advances of Ravana, and is linked not only to her devotion to her husband, but also to her devotion to the *tirthankars* and their ascetic prescriptions against extramarital sex. Sita's good faith and bravery is contrasted with the supposedly fickle nature of other women, as "in spite of her being a damsel, Sita possesses immense courage which is rarely to be found in men."<sup>89</sup> She is unusual in her mental discipline, and the virtue of her feat grants her physical protection from the threats of Ravana and his demon cohorts.

Both Digambar and Shvetambar *sadhvis* recognize Sita's refusal of Ravana's sexual advances as an example for their own conduct with men. As one of the 16 *satis*—the legendary

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<sup>88</sup> Vimala Suri, *Jain Ramayana*, 158.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* 188.

laywomen of Jainism who are known for their exceptional spirituality—Sita blends practice of faithful wifehood with ascetic celibacy, as she (like many other *satis*) acts as a loving and devoted wife before taking initiation as a *sadhvi* after her husband's death. Though she starts her life as a laywoman, perceptions of Sita also influence how the *sadhvis* perceive their own idealized performances of gender and religiosity. I argue that narratives of authority and power of both Jain laywomen and *sadhvis* collapse within these stories of ideal womanhood. The ideals of chastity witnessed in these narratives are quite palpable in the lived experiences of both laywomen and *sadhvis* as they strive to implement these ideals into their everyday lives through their steadfast fidelity to either their husbands or their ascetic vows.

It is important to note that in Jain tradition, chastity refers both to the renunciation of all sexual activity by Jain ascetic women as well as sexual and emotional fidelity to one's husband. The term *brahmacarya* is used in both contexts. The connection between chastity in the lives of laywomen and in the lives of *sadhvis* is most apparent in the accounts of the *satis* because both performances of *brahmacarya* are espoused as proper performances of Jain womanhood. In turn, the *satis* gain power and influence from their embodiments of chastity. Both lay and ascetic women share an experience in which “the female body is socialized to be a medium of expression, but the language it ‘speaks’ has a limited vocabulary...restricted to corporeal idioms of nurturance and sexuality.”<sup>90</sup> Yet within this vocabulary of chastity, Jain *satis* can amass spiritual power that can keep them safe when they are faced with danger (as in the case of Sita) and make them worthy of veneration by other Jains. Female Jain bodies (whether or not they are

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<sup>90</sup> Valley “These Hands Are Not For Henna,” 231.

ascetic bodies) possess an imperative to fulfill an expectation of chastity that rewards them with power, respect, and authority.<sup>91</sup>

While laywomen use Sita as a model for fidelity to one's husband, the *sadhvis* similarly conceptualize their steadfastness in keeping their vows (especially their vows of celibacy) as akin to Sita's loyalty to Rama. Siddhodaya Shriji describes *satis* as those "who prefer even to offer their lives but not their chastity," and typifies the behavior of *satis* as motivated by inner strength and confidence: "the *satis* are very confident. And the level of their confidence and self-reliance is such...they don't give up their *dharm*. They can give up all of their earthly pleasures, even they can give up their lives, but not *dharm*." Her linkage of *satis* with religious devotion reflects the collapse of worldly wife with women ascetics, especially in her assertion that *satis* similarly "give up all of their earthly pleasures." These sacrifices do not hinder the *satis* or *sadhvis*, but instill them with a sense of fulfillment that comes with fidelity. Siddhodaya Shriji's description of *satis* thus indicates that the *sadhvis* can identify with *satis* as models for renunciation, and that the power that *satis* obtain in their celibacy mirrors that obtained by the *sadhvis*. The *sadhvis* can build relationships with the *satis* as examples for their own lives by retelling their stories to emphasize their religious resolve and devotion to their vows.

This complexity of personage is especially encapsulated by the narrative of Sita. Not only is Sita a loyal wife, but she also gives up all "earthly pleasures" by taking *diksha* and becoming a *sadhvi* after Rama abandons her. Sita thus adapts her vow of *brahmacarya* as a vow against any sexual intercourse. This transition only enhances her already extraordinary spiritual powers. The

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<sup>91</sup> Given their shared gender expectations and performances, laywomen and *sadhvis* seem to be more at ease with each other's presence. I saw this early in my own ethnography, as my contact with the *sadhvis* was facilitated entirely by laywomen who had more extensive knowledge of the *sadhvi*'s whereabouts than even the prominent and well-established religious laymen. Laywomen were more likely to be in close association with the *sadhvis*. Kannak Prabha explicitly stated that her interactions with laywomen differed than with laymen because "when [they] talk to women, [they] can talk more freely [than] when [they] talk with males. So there are some limitations [with men]."

*Ramayana* indicates that because of Sita's devotion to *brahmacarya*, she alone leads an ideal Jain life, commenting, "'indeed [her] life is a success.'"<sup>92</sup> She is empowered to prevent sexual violence and to negate Rama's abandonment through her loyalty to the vows made to her husband, a commitment that serves as the root of her oft admired courage and discipline. In their parallel rejection of all sexuality, *sadhvis* similarly embody the imperative of chastity and loyalty par excellence. They look to Sita as setting a precedent for gaining power and satisfaction in the face of opposition through embracing the vows of chastity.

The story of Sita serves as an example for *sadhvis* as to how chastity serves as a mode of empowerment and protection from sexual violence. Many of the *sadhvis* interviewed mentioned emulating Sita's strong will and devotion as a method through which they maintained their *brahmacarya*. Like Sita, the *sadhvis* relied on their own "courage and boldness" to deflect sexual violence. Their commitment to their vows serves as a source of strength. As Mataji explains, potential attackers "can never do anything because...[if] own feelings are good, then nobody can pierce you. Yourself, himself, herself—they are good. I am all alone but I don't feel nervous from anybody. Because that kind of thinking is not in my mind." Similarly to how Sita's purity of mind protects her from Ravana, the *sadhvis* also imagine that their courage in heart and strength in spirit ensure their own safety. They too draw empowerment from their resilience and their loyalty to their vows, a devotional act that is comparable to Sita's loyalty to Rama.

Other demonstrations of chastity and the power associated with it by the *sadhvis* are seen in their very dress and appearance. Mataji described the prescription of plain dress among Jain ascetics as part of the ingenuity of Jainism, remarking how

"scientific logic is there...we remove our hairs, and we don't makeup and we wear *saris* simply, white. Attraction [from men] is not there. And *picchi* is there, and this one protect us. Everybody knows 'she is Mataji' and [a] follower of religion

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<sup>92</sup> Vimala Suri, *Jain Ramayana*, 342.

so [they say] ‘we can’t touch’...we [the *sadhvis*] are powerful....powerful woman”

Mataji suggests that because of the plain dress of the *sadhvis*, chastity is preserved and unwanted male attention is deterred. She also suggests that her appearance informs onlookers that she is impenetrable because of her spiritual prowess. Just as Sita’s power is emphasized in her ability to remain chaste in the face of Ravana, the *sadhvis*’ status as “powerful women” are similarly established by their undertaking of the vows of celibacy. She is a model for gaining empowerment through maintaining bodily integrity, which in turn informs one’s sense of agency, safety, and satisfaction.

Yet Sita’s story is not always interpreted as a model for empowered womanhood. The Jain *Ramayana* ends with Sita’s death and her transformation into a male deity. Some of the collaborators interpret Sita’s transformation as indicative of their own capacity to eventually overcome the female body and achieve perfect maleness. Mataji remarked how Sita “took *aryika diksha* and [she] will achieve *moksh* in next *chaturkal*. She got three things so she destroyed her *stri parisaha* [and] she became *indra*.” She focuses her interpretation of the *Ramayana* on Sita’s ability to defeat the suffering brought on by her femaleness (*stri parisaha*) in order to become a god (*indra*) and gain liberation from the cycle of rebirth during the next age. Her pious devotion towards her husband and her vow of *brahmacarya* rewards her not only with the protection of her female body, but also with the rejection of her female body, and the destruction of all of her womanly faults. Without the elimination of Sita’s femaleness, she could never achieve the highest state of spiritual being. The inclusion of this element of the narrative by some of the *sadhvis* (and its exclusion by other *sadhvis*) demonstrates the ways in which these women retell stories in order to reconcile this admiration with the legend’s message on maleness as a reward for empowered religiosity

The complex and perhaps contradicting character of the Sita story reflects the multifaceted nature of empowerment as it appears in the *sadhvis'* lives. Empowerment is constructed through the simultaneous embrace of opposites—self-love and gynophobia, womanhood and the transformation into maleness, body and spirit. The *sadhvis* navigate these complexities through the reinterpretation and retelling of these mytho-historical narratives, emphasizing details that reflect the realities of their positionality as Jain ascetics. What is retold in these stories is essentially a manifestation of self, as Malli and Sita are seen as models for religious and gendered performance of the ideal Jain *sadhvi*. What emerges from these retellings is a myriad of ways in which these women can draw empowerment through the authority and agency exhibited by these legendary figures. They serve as lessons for how to operate within a Jain community in a manner that attracts the respect of laypeople and deflects objections to the *sadhvis* power.

### **Conclusion: Interdependence, Introspection**

Empowerment cannot be measured on a quantitative scale. Its presence is subtle and often nearly undetectable. Given the *sadhvis'* own self-evaluations of their status as powerful women, their narratives display a sense of empowerment that is derived from their capacity for authority within their religious communities. This authority is derived from both the relationships that they form with the laity and the relationships that they form with mytho-historical figures. My collaborators locate their sources for empowerment within the bonds that they form with others.

Studying the ways in which empowerment is derived from the relationships that *sadhvis* form with others has far-reaching implications for both the field of Jain studies and the field of

religious studies itself. First and foremost, this ethnography brings attention to a community that exists as a minority tradition in both India and in academic discourse on religion. Today, Jains comprise 4% of India's total population (about 4-5 million people), making them one of the country's smallest religious minorities.<sup>93</sup> Given the small size of this community, the religion accrues little attention in the field of South Asian religion studies, which itself receives only a small portion of recognition among Euroamerican scholars of religion.<sup>94</sup> Studying Jain *sadhvis* and bringing scholarly attention to the broader field of Jain studies is crucial as it opens up further research opportunities and speaks to the validity of Jain studies as a worthwhile pursuit.

A study that focusses specifically on the presence of empowerment in these women's narratives is also significant because it complicates portrayals of orthodox religiosity and feminism as diametrically opposed categories. The predominant and Euroamerican-centric nature of this dichotomy is essential to highlight because it suppresses the narratives of non-Euroamerican women who encounter organized religion in an entirely different light. A study of empowerment in the narratives of *sadhvis* is essential because it disrupts the Euroamerican-centric perception of organized religion as opposed to women's welfare, and the notion that women who embrace organized religion are either "victims" of patriarchy or "traitors" to the movement. It demonstrates realistic ways in which non-Euroamerican women can navigate patriarchal structures that allow them to gain empowerment. Most importantly, it gives voice to women whose stories are often ignored in Euroamerican feminist discourse.

The empowerment gained through authority plays an important role in the lives of the *sadhvis*. However, it is important to acknowledge that the relationships that *sadhvis* form with

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<sup>93</sup> Prakash C Jain, *Jains in India and Abroad: A Sociological Introduction* (New Delhi: International School for Jain Studies, 2011), 49, 54, 56, 80, 62, 67.

<sup>94</sup> This is not to say that scholars of South Asian studies are not doing groundbreaking work in the field. Rather, it is a comment on the realities of resource allocation in academia that often does not favor studies of South Asian religion.

others are not one-sided. Just as empowerment is derived from retaining authority in these relationships, it is similarly derived from a shared sense of interdependence established between the *sadhvis* and the laypeople. Mataji's dependency on the local Jain laypeople was especially visible to me—perhaps because I spent the most time in her presence and with Jaipur's Digambar Jain community. Because of Jain asceticism's strict restrictions regarding possessions, Mataji had no car, telephone, or means to secure food. She relied on a group of laypeople to provide her with a car for transportation, a cellphone for contacting Jain laypeople to arrange for lodgings, and the food for her once-daily meal. Without the assistance of these laypeople, she could not have the means or the energy necessary to undertake her ascetic practice. Though Mataji did not explicitly acknowledge her interdependency on the laypeople to empower her to engage in an ascetic lifestyle, she did mention how her interactions with the laypeople were sources of satisfaction, as she got to meet many people who knew of her fame and treated her nicely. A more explicit acknowledgement of the interdependent relationship that I observed in these interactions was given by the Rohini Pragyaji, who summed up the interdependent relationship as “a...[two]-way traffic. It's not like we are only giving something to them. Equally they are also [giving]...[they are] enriching us...from many points of view they are enriching us.”

The interdependency of the *sadhvis* and the laypeople is also demonstrated in the narratives of mytho-historical figures which serve as models for Jain ascetic behavior. Sita's reliance on her husband even in her spiritual superiority is a model for interdependence between women and men, wives and husbands, and ascetics and laypeople. Malli's crowning achievement is not her own spiritual aptitude as it stands alone, but rather her ability to cultivate the spiritual aptitudes of others. Thus both Malli and Sita's narratives demonstrate subtle themes of

privileging interdependence as paramount for ascetic practice. *Sadhvis* know that they are neither divorced from nor escaping the world. They maintain relationships with others which are essential for their conceptualization as Jain religious women.<sup>95</sup> Without interacting with those others who reside outside the present ascetic fold (such as the laypeople and the mytho-historical figures who inhabit the past), the realization of oneself as a paragon of religiosity and spirituality becomes impossible. Self is based in others.

Thus *sadhvis* depend also upon their interactions with other Jains to instill them with a sense of empowerment, just as these Jains depend upon the *sadhvis* to serve as paragons of the religious community. Yet it is not only these intracommunity relationships that warrant a sense of reciprocity in identity formation. Through this study, I discovered that the project of ethnography itself fosters a sense of interdependency between the ethnographer and her collaborators. True, I hoped that my endeavor would prove beneficial for the *sadhvis* involved, but they were not the only ones to (hopefully) benefit from our interviews and meetings. This project was reflective and introspective for me because it allowed me to examine my own views on empowerment, religiosity, and my positionality as a scholar and an outsider to the Jain community. Most of all, I benefitted from my relationships with the *sadhvis* because I was given the chance to develop friendships with an extraordinary group of women.

I conclude this thesis with a narrative that examines the intersection between empowerment, authority, and the self-affirmation that both the *sadhvis* conveyed and that I developed as an ethnographer through these series of interactions and conversations. We return

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<sup>95</sup> Whether or not interdependent relationships are more prominent among ascetic women than ascetic men—and whether this has any implications for the opportunities for women to renounce—remains to be seen, as further comparative studies between male and female Jain ascetics would be required to assert such a claim. Future studies could enquire into the differing perceptions of empowerment gained from both authority and empowerment among Jain monks and *sadhvis*, and ascertain whether differences between each gender's relationships to laypeople or mytho-historical figures occur. From the present study, we can only conclude that empowerment is derived from the authority that *sadhvis* gain in their relations to laypeople and mytho-historical figures *and* the acknowledged interdependency shared between *sadhvis* and laypeople.

again to Ganani Aryika Pragyamati Mataji, the *sadhvi* whom I interacted with the most throughout my study. After interviewing her twice, Mataji invited me to come to her *pravachan* the next morning. I eagerly accepted, happy to have the opportunity to see Mataji speak to the laypeople. The next morning, entered the main hall where Mataji had just started to give her morning *pravachan*. Mataji continued to speak for the next half hour, the contents and vocabulary of her *pravachan* far exceeding my own limited knowledge of Hindi. I sat there nervously, not knowing what was being said or even how to inhabit this unfamiliar moment. I remained lost in my own thoughts until I suddenly heard Mataji utter the word “American.”

Yes, she was talking about me. One of the laymen who sat up front during Mataji’s *pravachan* stood up and motioned for me to come forward to the front of the room, where the lecturing *sadhvi* sat on her raised platform. I stood up, stumbled through the seated crowd, and made my way to Mataji’s side. She smiled, nodded, and spoke in indecipherable (to me, anyway) Hindi. The layman translated for me, saying that Mataji was glad to have me here and that she would like me to tell the crowd about my experiences talking with the *sadhvis* and studying Jainism. I turned pale white and wide-eyed. But how could I refuse Mataji’s request? I took a deep breath, took the microphone from the layman’s hands, and said (in the most broken Hindi imaginable): “My name is K.C. I was born in a non-vegetarian family. I admire Jainism and the *sadhvis*. I study Jainism because I admire its emphasis on nonviolence, and I am now a vegetarian.” After finishing this speech, I breathed a heavy sigh of relief and quickly thrust the microphone back into the layman’s hands.

I was then asked to offer a coconut to Mataji, who was glowing. She seemed proud. After making the offering, the *pravachan* formally concluded, and the laypeople began to approach the platform to give their own offerings to Mataji. Many of the laypeople nodded at me approvingly,

one of the laywomen even taking me by the hands and telling me how happy she was to have me visit the temple. After receiving the adoration of the laypeople, Mataji invited me upstairs to her room for a brief moment of respite and privacy from the laypeople. As she translated her previous *pravachan* from Hindi into English for me, she told me that the strength of her *pravachans* derived from her ability to make her words manifest into reality. In the same way, Mataji explained, her own words about me attending her *pravachan* came true—she told me to come, and here I was.

This meeting with Mataji allowed me to experience the *sadhvis'* authority firsthand. For some reason—perhaps because of how she spoke, how she dressed, or how all the laypeople seemed so eager to hang on her every word—I felt compelled to do what Mataji said. My deference to her authority empowered Mataji because it reinforced her own perception of her status within the community as a source of spiritual guidance and superiority. In this instance, her self-satisfaction was linked to my obedience just as my position as an outsider ethnographer was to her approval. While my status as an outsider was not erased in this one moment of acceptance, Mataji facilitated a point of connection between me and the Jain laypeople that allowed me to feel more confident in my positionality. Mataji's authority within (and to an extent, outside) the Jain community contributed to her sense of empowerment, which she in turn used to bridge the divide between ethnographer and collaborator, outsider and insider—if only for a brief moment.

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**Glossary**<sup>96</sup>

***ahimsā***: roughly equivalent to “nonviolence;” includes the elimination of suffering or pain caused towards animals, plants, and microorganisms; one of the great vows (*mahāvrat*s) of Jain ascetics.

***aparigraha***: non-possessiveness or non-ownership; entails renouncing all or most material possessions; one of the great vows (*mahāvrat*s) of Jain ascetics.

***āryikā***: in Digambar Jainism, a Jain woman who has undertaken the great vows (*mahāvrat*s); sometimes used interchangeably with the term *sādhvi*; Digambar Jains do not consider *āryikā* to be full-fledged ascetics because they still wear clothes.

***asteya***: non-stealing; one of the great vows (*mahāvrat*s) of Jain ascetics.

***brahmacaryā***: chastity or celibacy; one of the great vows (*mahāvrat*s) of Jain ascetics.

**Brahmin**: the priestly caste of Vedic Hindu religion; theoretically absent in Jainism.

***dharm***: roughly translated as “religion” or “religious path.”

***dikshā***: the initiation ceremony that marks a Jain woman’s entrance into the ascetic order.

**Digambar**: one of two primary sects of Jainism; differ from Shvetāmbar in that their monks reject clothing, they dispute the potential for women to reach enlightenment, and they believe that omniscient (enlightened) saints no longer need to eat to stay alive.

***guru***: a teacher or master who dispenses wisdom to students, oftentimes in a South Asian religious context.

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<sup>96</sup> Diacritical marks are presented for interested readers.

***jina***: “victor,” a person who has conquered the material world and the temptations of the senses; sometimes used synonymously with *tīrthaṅkar*.

***jīva***: a soul, or that matter which possesses a soul.

***karma***: defined in Jainism as a material entity that sticks to souls that display strong emotions or perform certain actions; the removal of this substance is the goal of several Jain philosophies.

***kevala-jñāna***: in Jainism, omniscience gained through intense spiritual practice.

***Mahāvīr***: the 24<sup>th</sup> *tīrthaṅkar* in Jainism; believed to have established the prescriptive guidelines for the modern Jain ascetic community.

***mahāvrat***s: the five great vows undertaken by Jain ascetics; include non-violence, non-possessiveness, non-stealing, non-lying, and celibacy.

***Māllī***: the 19<sup>th</sup> *tīrthaṅkar* in Jainism; Shvetāmbar Jains sometimes assert that she was the only woman *tīrthaṅkar*.

***moksh***: in Jainism, synonymous with *kevala-jñāna*; a state of tranquility outside the cycle of rebirth.

***Pārshvanāth***: the 23<sup>rd</sup> *tīrthaṅkar* in Jainism; believed to be the first *tīrthaṅkar* who can be located in the historical record.

***picchi***: a broom made of fallen peacock feathers carried by Digambar Jain ascetics; used to sweep insects away from harm when walking or sitting; a similar broom is carried by Shvetāmbar ascetics, but is made of different material (sometimes cloth).

***pravachan***: a speech or lecture given by Jain ascetics on religious values, morals, or stories.

***Rāmāyaṇ***: an account of the mythical prince Rāma popular in South Asian oral and written tradition.

***sādhvi***: a Jain ascetic woman; used colloquially to refer to both Shvetāmbar and Digambar ascetic women.

***samani***: a category of Jain ascetic women employed by the Terāpanth subsect; Jain ascetic women who are permitted to use vehicular transportation and to receive food cooked for them by the laity.

***satī***: a chaste and loyal wife who is remembered in oral and written tradition for her legendary devotion.

***satya***: non-lying or truth-telling; one of the great vows (*mahāvrat*s) of Jain ascetics.

**Shvetāmbar**: one of two primary sects of Jainism; differ from Digambaras in that their monks wear white robes, they believe that female ascetics can gain enlightenment, and they ascertain that enlightened saints must still consume food in order to live.

**Sītā**: a character of the *Rāmāyaṇam*; Rama’s wife; a legendary Jain wife (*satī*).

**Terāpanth**: a sub-sect of Shvetāmbar Jainism; differ from other Shvetāmbar Jains in their emphasis on rejecting the worship of images while embracing centralized authority; established an order of Jain ascetic women who are permitted to use vehicular transportation and receive food cooked for them by householders.

***ūrthaṅkar***: “ford-maker;” a person who has freed him or herself from the cycle of rebirth and can help other Jains do the same; Jains recognize a list of 24 of such figures.

**Vedic Brahmanism**: the religious and ritual traditions from before 500 BCE; a precursor to contemporary Hindu belief and practice.

***vihār***: the constant wandering undertaken by Jain ascetics during all seasons except the monsoon season; consists of Jain ascetics wandering barefoot to different villages and cities, sometimes while being guided by groups of Jain laypeople.

**Appendix I: Demographic Information of Collaborators**

<b>NAME (given during interview)</b>	Aryika Gaurav Mati Sadhvi	Ganini Aryika Pragyamati Mataji	Jain Sadhvi Bhavyanandshri	Sadhvi Kannak Prabha Shriji
<b>SECT</b>	Digambar	Digambar	Shvetambar	Shvetambar
<b>SUB-SECT (if applicable)</b>	None given	None given	None given	Murtipujak
<b>AGE (at time of interview)</b>	61	53	55	47
<b>MARITAL STATUS</b>	Never married	Never married	Never married	Never married
<b>HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION RECEIVED</b>	PhD	Education in languages, but no specific degree mentioned	PhD	PhD
<b>LOCATION INTERVIEWED</b>	Jaipur, India	Jaipur, India	Jaipur, India	Jaipur, India
<b>TRANSLATOR REQUIRED</b>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Sadhvi Shuddha Bodhi Shriji	Samani Rohini Pragya	Samani Satya Pragya	Samvar Bodhi Shriji	Siddhodaya Shriji
Shvetambar	Shvetambar	Shvetambar	Shvetambar	Shvetambar
Murtipujak	Terapanthi	Terapanthi	Murtipujak	None given
60	39	49	28	41
Previously married	Never married	Never married	Never married	Never married
Degree not mentioned	PhD	PhD	MA	Degree not mentioned
Jaipur, India	New Jersey, USA	New Jersey, USA	Jaipur, India	Jaipur, India
Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes

## Appendix II: An Overview of Jain Sects and Sectarian Beliefs and Practices

Four divisive issues separate the two Jain sects of Shvetambars and Digambaras.

1. *The bodily functions of humans who achieve kevala-jnana*: Shvetambars maintain that those that attain omniscience (such as the *tirthankars*) are still constrained by their bodily needs (hunger, thirst, etc.), while Digambaras argue that omniscient beings are not subject to bodily functions.<sup>97</sup>
2. *The Jain textual canon*: Shvetambars acknowledge the legitimacy of 46 scriptures that serve as the central Jain canon.<sup>98</sup> Many of these texts are believed to reflect the teachings of Mahavir. Digambaras argue that such texts were lost, and thus do not acknowledge this canon.
3. *Nudity in asceticism*: Both male and female Shvetambar ascetics are clothed in white robes, as they believe that the requirement for nudity in asceticism was rendered obsolete due to its difficulty in the present age.<sup>99</sup> Digambaras conceive of nudity as a facet of *aparigraha* (the vow of non-possession), as it forces ascetics to give up their possession of clothes. Therefore, it is a required part of full ascetic practice.<sup>100</sup> Male Digambar monks wear no clothes. Shvetambar monks wear white robes.
4. *The status of women*: Shvetambars maintain that women can achieve liberation from *samsara*, while Digambaras believe that the inability of women to give up their possession of clothing prevents them from achieving liberation in their lifetimes. Women are barred from practicing nudity in both traditions because it would place them at risk for sexual assault and would spark sexual desire among laymen and monks.<sup>101</sup>

Within both the Digambar and Shvetambar sects are several sub-sects. The most relevant sub-sects to this thesis are two sub-sects of the Shvetambar sect, the Murtipujaks and the Terapanthis, as no other sub-sects were mentioned by my collaborators. The Terapanth sub-sect is a relatively

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<sup>97</sup> Tatia, *That Which Is*, xxxiv.

<sup>98</sup> Jagdish C. Jain, *Life in Ancient India as Depicted in the Jain Canons* (Bombay: New Book, 1947), 31.

<sup>99</sup> Tatia, *That Which Is*, xxxiv.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> When Digambar *sadhvis* themselves are asked about their inability to renounce clothing, they give vague answers that allude to both the danger of traveling as a nude woman, and the impure nature of the female body. Mataji responded to the barring of female nudity only with “so many things are there...and religion don’t allow,” the tone of her voice dimming to a dull whisper. The *sadhvi*’s apprehension towards discussing nude female bodies indicates that there may be some anxiety or shame about the body’s safety and purity.

new order, as it was established in 1759 by 13 Jain monks who sought to revive the ascetic imperative of Jain practice and worship that they felt was abandoned by their current order.<sup>102</sup>

Murtipujak and Terapanthi Jains differ on the following issues:

- 1) *Images in temples*: Murtipujak Jains adorn their temples and shrines with images of *tirthankars* and other figures. These images are decorated and adored. Terapanthi Jains are aniconic and have no images in their spaces of worship.
- 2) *Approach to ahimsa*: Like most other sects of Jainism, Murtipujak Jains encourage the support and foundation of hospitals and animal shelters as a means to encourage nonviolence (*ahimsa*) within the world. Terapanthi Jains argues that such activities are “*social* and not *religious* activit[ies]...they do not lead to any *spiritual* gains.”<sup>103</sup> They thus do not participate in these activities.
- 3) *Hierarchical authority*: Terapanthi Jains follow a centralized hierarchical order that culminates in a single leader (a male ascetic).<sup>104</sup> Murtipujak Jains do not follow such a rigid hierarchy.
- 4) *Presence of samanīs*: Among Murtipujak or other Jains, there is no order of *samanīs*. Terapanthis, however, employ an order of *samanīs* who are identical to *sadhvis* except in their ability to accept food from laypeople that has been specifically cooked for them and to use vehicular transportation. The Terapanthi sub-sect established the *samani* order out of concern for the spread of Jainism, as the limitations placed upon ascetics prevent them from traveling great distances within and outside of India.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Valley, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 60-62.

<sup>103</sup> Valley, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 31.

<sup>104</sup> Valley, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 23.

<sup>105</sup> Valley, *Guardians of the Transcendent*, 72.