

Is gender discrimination implicitly perpetuated by Jain beliefs?

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Rationale

I always wondered why my sister never performed the same rituals I did whenever we went back to our hometown in India. Growing up with Jain parents, I was curious as to why that was the case - how did my sister, who was older, smarter, and more religious than me, never get the chance to perform darshan by herself, or never got to sit in the front during Jain ceremonies and rituals. I had known that Indian society was one that had always been patriarchal, but I always believed that Jainism was a religion that would never perpetuate the massive gender inequality the world is facing, considering Jainism is a religion that believes in equality not just amongst genders, but amongst species and everything in our world. Yet, here I was, witnessing a gender divide during every religious ceremony I performed, every *derasar* I went to, and every ritual I watched. Clearly, there was a discrepancy between what Jain scripture tells us and what the reality of the Jain community is today. This inconsistency led me to my question for this study: Is gender discrimination implicitly perpetuated by Jain beliefs?

In conducting my research, I read many books, journals, research papers, and went back to my hometown to have a discussion with a *Maharajsaheb*, a Jain monk. A research paper that I used in this paper was written by Dr. Manisha Sethi, a sociologist who studies how many Indian religions have an impact on the large issue of gender inequality in India. In her paper, she writes that “Jainism is a religion of religious equality, devoted to recognising the rights of all living creatures”(Sethi). This is what I had always believed, which is why I was so surprised to find that Jainism rituals seemed so patriarchal. Upon further research, I found that a BBC article had written that different sects of Jainism have very different beliefs on the role of a woman in Jainism and in society. It writes “The *Digambara* Jain sect believes that women cannot achieve liberation without being reborn as men first. The *Svetambara* sect disagrees”(Religions). After reading this, I realized that I may need to research the differences in sects and significance of each one to fully answer my question. In order to study the different sects, I read Wiley’s *The Historical Dictionary of Jainism*,

in which she outlines many important keys and differences in the sects. I also read *The Bloomsbury research handbook of Indian philosophy and gender* - specifically the part on Jain religion to see how Dr. Howard, associate professor of Asian religions, views Jainism and its impact on gender inequality. As several of these books and journal articles were written by females, there may be bias in the evidence that I will be using. However, I believe that they will be able to use factual evidence to back up their claims.

I went back home to India recently and was able to sit down with a *Maharajsaheb* and discuss with him the implications of the patriarchal norms that are outlined in some sects of Jainism. To fully understand how gender inequality persists on a societal level, it was very important to talk to him to see his views on it and how it has changed over the years. There would most likely be bias in his responses to my queries, so I would have to consider that when conducting the interview.

Plan for Study

I will be researching the aforementioned question: Is gender discrimination implicitly perpetuated by Jain beliefs? To do so, I will have to address the Shwetambar and the Digambar sects of Jainism. I will first go into the history of how the two sects came about. As previously mentioned, the Shwetambar sect believes that women can achieve moksh in Jainism while the Digambar does not. This is a main reason that Shwetambar are larger in number - because they allow women to have more agency over themselves as Jains. After highlighting differences between the two sects, I will attempt to find discrepancies within the Digambar sect and their teachings. This can be done through exploration of many Jain texts called the Agams. They say that Jainism is a very equal religion, yet do not allow women to achieve moksh like men. I will also discuss how there are other ways in which even the Shwetambar sect perpetuates gender inequality. Here I can draw examples not just from the non-Agams - the Shwetambar texts - but also draw on my own

experiences as well as the interview that I conducted when I was in India. I will conclude by determining the causes of gender inequality through Jainism in Indian culture and future directions.

Summary of significant findings

Though there is “an amazing doctrinal consensus” between the Digambar and Shwetambar sects¹, the one major discrepancy between both sects ultimately comes down to gender (Sethi). The Digambar sect lives in full nudity², do not believe that there has ever been a female god, and deny that Mahavir Bhagvan ever had a wife, while the Shwetambar sect allow themselves to be clothed, believes that the nineteenth god Malli Devi was a female, and accept that Mahavir had a wife and even had a daughter (Klingorova). The discrepancies between the sects show that Digambers seem to place much less significance on the female body, which is why they have heated disputes regarding strinirvana - the possibility of women achieving moksh directly. Digambers dismiss this idea, because they believe that while men can be nude, is it a paap³ for women to be nude, as their nudity creates desire for the flesh within men (Sharma). These differences emphasize the slightly more patriarchal norms set by the Digambar sect. However, I wanted to study scriptures that the Shwetambar sect also believed in and identify moments of gender inequality.

As a kid, I had heard many stories about Satis⁴, and though I remember them, I decided to revisit them and see how we viewed virtuous women. I read parts of the Uttaradhyayana Sutra⁵ in

¹ The two sects are believed to have split several centuries after Mahavir's death due to different interpretations of the Tirthankar's preachings (Wiley).

² "Dig" in Prakrit (Indo-Aryan vernacular that later evolved into Sanskrit) roughly translates to "of the sky", and "ambar" translates to "clothed". This means that the only clothes that Digambers wear are the ones of the sky, which is why they live their lives in full nudity (Howard).

³ "Paap" in Jainism is a sin that allows karma to accumulate on the atma of a being, while "punya" is the good deeds completed that rids the atma of the karma. To achieve moksh, one must have a soul free of karma.

⁴ Satis are women that are very virtuous, usually through fidelity. However, there are sixteen Satis in particular that Jains use as the ideal female role model, one of which is Rajimati.

⁵ The Uttaradhyayana is believed to be the most important Agams for the Shwetambar Sect. Some believe that it contains preachings from Mahavir Bhagvan himself.

Gujurati and relearned the story of Rajimati.⁶ This story initially celebrates the virtuous nature of Rajimati and sets an example for women to behave. However, this story was easily twisted and used as a message to how women are sexual agents who attempt to deceive men with their body. The Sutrakritanga Sutra⁷ writes, “a woman will tempt men to a comfortable couch or bed” (Jacobi). So, in the same story of a virtuous woman comes the implicit message that women are the root cause of all problems. Even though Rajimati’s brother in law was the one aroused, she was the nimitta - the cause - of his arousal, and thus, is the one that has created paap and is impure (Howard).

India has recently been one of the poorest countries ranked by the UN with regards to their gender equality (Howard). While much of the blame is put on major religions like Hinduism for perpetuating patriarchal norms, many claim that Jainism is one of the few religions in India that support gender equality (Sethi). However, this does not seem to be very accurate either, as many sutras and stories within the Agams have encouraged patriarchal norms.

Critical Reflection and Evaluation

My research question was addressed with multiple pieces of evidence such as the discrepancies between the two sects, verses and stories from Sutras in the Agam, and the current gender inequality in India. For the most part, though I had believed that Jainism is a religion that holds both genders in much equal regard, my initial study of the Jain scripture and articles showed otherwise. The most surprising thing I encountered was that the interpretation and portrayal of the Satis were quite misogynistic, even though the Satis were meant to be virtuous women. This is why

⁶ As the wife of Neminath Bhaghvan, who took Diksha and had left her alone, she was wandering through the forest when it began to rain and decided to dry her clothes in a cave nearby. She met her brother-in-law, who then attempted to persuade her to have sex with him. However, she refused to do so, and her chastity was rewarded as she attained moksh due to her virtuous behaviour (Klingorova).

⁷ These are the second Agam within the full set of Jain Agams, and addresses many of the so-called issues of women.

it was so easy for followers to take Satis and, instead of talking about the importance of being virtuous, twist it into ideas that further oppress women in society today.

A potential inconsistency within my investigation is that the pieces of evidence from scripture that I used could potentially have been misinterpreted⁸, which is why some of the scripture regarding women in the Agams may have been inaccurate. Additionally, the books and journal articles about Jainism and gender were all written by authors who already believed that Jainism perpetuated patriarchal norms, creating a potential for biases. Therefore, another inconsistency that would have arisen in my paper is that my own thoughts would also have been biased, as I am only reading papers that support one side of this argument.

In order to attempt to approach this topic from a different point of view, I decided to talk to a Shwetambar *Maharajsaheb* when I was in India to see his thoughts about gender inequality in Jainism. I initially expected him to believe that Jainism does perpetuate patriarchal beliefs in accordance to my research. However, when I interviewed him, I was shocked to see that he was steadfast in his stance that men and women are equal (Mehta). He also disagreed with the research of interpretations regarding the Satis, and that the Sol Satis were extremely good and virtuous women that should be looked up to not just by women⁹, but also by men (Mehta). He also strongly disagreed with the Digambar sect, as he believed that they took Mahavir's teaching too literally and translated their sect into one without any clothing. Ultimately, he believes that though Jainism itself may not have been a direct mechanism to perpetuate sexist beliefs in India, he does think that many people have taken religion as an opportunity to oppress women (Mehta). Therefore, though many scholarly articles have claimed that Jainism is a patriarchal religion because of the poor portrayal of

⁸ When I was reading in Gujarati, the rough translation from the original language, Prakrit, may not have been properly translated.

⁹ He claims that the story of Rajimati showed strong resistance to temptation and good intentions. He even went as far as to say that mothers were of more importance than fathers because mothers birthed and nurtured the future generations (Mehta).

women in their society, the *Maharajsaheb* that I encountered had already told me otherwise; it was the misinterpretations that created an image of Jainism as a misogynistic religion (Mehta).

While the results of the interview contradicted the prior research on the interpretations of the gender inequality caused by Jainism, the conclusion that can be made is that even within sects, the minute interpretations of stories can eventually snowball into much larger implications about the inferiority of women that have extremely influential impacts in Indian society today. In the future, I would like to interview a Mahajsaheb of the Digambar sect, as they are much more outspoken on their belief of the inferiority of women, and understand why they believe so. This way, I would have more interpretations of the text to base my conclusions. Though the majority of religions have been quite patriarchal since the Neolithic Revolution¹⁰, Jainism - and specifically the Shwetambar sect - seems to be one of the few religions today that promote equality amongst all genders and species.

¹⁰ The Neolithic Revolution was the transition from a hunter-gatherer society to one that was able to domesticate crops and livestock and settle down. This caused a shift from the predominantly matriarchal society to one that was quite patriarchal, and many anthropologists believe that religion became more patriarchal starting from this point in time.

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