

Women in medieval Buddhist and Jain monasticism

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From the Pāli Vinaya

“It is impossible, Ānanda, it cannot come to pass, that the Tathāgata should allow greeting, standing up for, respectful salutation and the performance of proper duties towards women [by monks]. Ānanda, even the followers of other sects, whose conduct is poorly guarded, will not carry out greeting, standing up for, respectful salutation and the performance of proper duties towards women; how, then, could the Tathāgata allow greeting... and proper duties towards women?”

Pāli Vin 2.257

From a Jain text

“Even if a nun were initiated for a hundred years and a monk were initiated just this day, he is still worthy of being worshiped by her through such acts of respect as going forward in reverential greeting, salutation, and bowing down.”

Upadeśamālā of Dharmadāsa Gaṇi
(4th-5th century CE)

Jain order for monastic women

All the Jain Tīrthaṅkaras are said to have nuns and laywomen among their followers

- R̥ṣabha: 84,000 monks, 300,000 nuns
- Pārśva: 16,000 monks, 38,000 nuns
- Mahāvīra: 14,000 monks, 36,000 nuns

These numbers not to be taken literally, but it is probably significant that nuns always outnumber the monks

Indic terms for Jain mendicants:

niggantha (m.), *nigganthī* (f.) (*nirgrantha*, *nirgranthī*) “without bounds”
muni (m.), *sādhvī* (f.)

Digambaras and Śvetāmbaras

- division into two main sects solidified by mid-fifth century CE
- gradual movement towards differentiation rather than abrupt doctrinal split
- main points of disagreement:



Śvetāmbara sect:

- monks and nuns wear robes
- believe that women can attain spiritual liberation without rebirth in a male body
- believe that the *kevalin*, the fully omniscient being, still experiences hunger

Digambara sect:

- fully initiated monks do not wear clothes
- reject the idea of spiritual liberation for women
- reject the omniscient being's need for food
- reject the authority of Śvetāmbara scriptures

Jain rules for mendicants

- six canonical texts explaining the regulations of Jain monastic life, collectively known as **the Chedasūtras**
- in contrast to Buddhism, no separate sections for the rules intended specifically for nuns
- usually rules phrased for both monks and nuns: “a monk or a nun is not allowed to...”
- but sometimes more restricting for nuns: “a monk is allowed to... but not a nun”

The Chedasūtras are lists of rules, without much elaboration or exegesis. More detailed explanations, narratives and exceptions to rules are laid out in later post-canonical commentaries (ca. 6th-13th centuries CE)

**TEXTUAL SOURCES,
AND HOW TO READ THEM**

Historical references to Jain nuns

- An inscription behind a statue from Akoṭā in Vikrama Saṃvat 697 (c. 640 CE) mentions Sādhvī Khambilyā, a student of Siddha Mahattarā
- the life-story of the Jain scholar Haribhadra Sūri (700-770 CE) makes reference to an impressive Jain nun, Yākinī Mahattarā, who converted him
- Beginning in the ninth century, Jain nuns are also mentioned in manuscripts as involved in textual production



Textual sources for researching monastic women in early medieval India

- inscriptions
- some references and caricatured depictions in courtly dramas and narratives in Sanskrit
- monastic commentaries
 - Buddhist Vinaya commentaries, e.g.
 - *Samantapāsādikā* of Buddhaghosa (5th century)
 - *Vinayasūtra* and *Vinayasūtra Autocommentary* by Guṇaprabha (7th century)
 - Jain commentaries on the Chedasūtras, e.g.
 - *Bṛhatkalpa-bhāṣya* of Saṅghadāsa (6th/7th century)
 - *Niśītha-cūrṇi* of Jinadāsa (7th century)

**SOME SHARED ISSUES FOR
BUDDHIST AND JAIN ORDERS
FOR NUNS**

1. Organization and authority within the monastic order

- order of seniority in greeting
- no 8 *gurudharmas* for Jain nuns, but same principles throughout their rules
- seats:
 - Buddhist nuns must immediately rise from their seats when seeing a monk (*Vinayasūtra Autocommentary* II. 44b3-4)
 - Jain nuns must receive instruction standing up while monks are allowed to sit down (*Vyavahāra-bhāṣya* 3097, *Bṛhatkalpa-bhāṣya* 4090)
 - Being provided with seats is a special honor reserved for monks



Relief in Ellora Caves, India (10th century CE?)

2. Monks as guardians of nuns

“For women-folk, it is inappropriate to stay in a place where there is no refuge.” Buddhist *Vinayasūtra Autocommentary* II. 46a1

“When a woman is born, her parents guard her; when “given,” her mother, father, in-laws, and husband; when widowed, her father, brother, and son. The nun is also [guarded] by the teacher, by the male group-leader, and the female group-leader.”

Jain *Vyavahāra-bhāṣya* 1590

Cf. “Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in her youth, and her sons guard her in her old age; a woman is not qualified to act independently.” (*The Laws of Manu* 9.3)

3. Ordination

Jainism:

- 18 causes preventing ordination for men, 20 causes for women (including pregnancy and having a young child)
- some texts admit that men can ordain without permission of family members, whereas women need their permission: “because men are not dependent on others, while a woman depends on others” (*purisāṇaṃ na paratantattam, itthī puṇa paratantā; Ācāradinakara* by Vardhamānasūri, p. 123b)

Buddhism:

- If one ordains [a woman] who does not have the permission of her master. (*ananujñātāyāḥ svāminā | Vinayasūtra 2.2264*)
 - Guṇaprabha’s commentary: “A husband is troubled if his wife gets ordained [without permission], while there is not so much trouble if one ordains him [= the husband], as he has abandoned his wife.”
- the Sanskrit *Bhikṣuṇīvinaya* of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādins (0-400 CE?) explains that, for an unmarried girl, it would be her parents, and for a married woman her in-laws and husband | Roth (ed.), *Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya*, 139.

4. Safety of lodgings

“The [dwelling] should be guarded, with guarded doors... A dwelling is suitable if it has solid walls, a panel door, is near [the houses of] the host’s own mother and sisters, free from calamities, and has a wide area in the back of the house; is not too close [to the neighbors] and not too far, in the midst of [the dwellings of] widows and women of advanced age, without distractions, and near good people who are not overly curious.”

Jain Bṛhatkalpa-bhāṣya 2058-60

“A nunnery should be constructed inside a town. She should not stand at its door. ‘Its’ [meaning] the nunnery’s. ‘She’ [meaning] the nun. Nor at a viewing-window—[she may not] stand [there]. Here, ‘a viewing window’ is not only a window, but one through which everything outside is visible. It should not be built at a cross-roads. Not without an outer garment.”

Buddhist Vinayasūtra Autocommentary II. 265a5-7

5. Importance of modest appearance

While a Jain monk owns only three pieces of clothing, the complete outfit of a nun includes an additional set of eleven items:

“The menstrual pad, the underpants, the waist-cover and the short petticoat [...]; the inner and outer skirts, and the cover for the breasts; the left-shoulder cover, the right shoulder-cover, the cloak and the wind-cover.”

Bṛhatkalpa-bhāṣya 4082-83a

“When she is well-covered by the waist-cover and the long skirt, she is protected down to her feet. Cultured people [will agree to meet] nuns if they move in groups of three and make noise. But if a nun wears only one cloth, she will quickly come to ruin.”

Bṛhatkalpa-bhāṣya 4114

In Buddhist texts, less is said about the specifics of nuns' robes:

“**Five robes.** The three robes of a nun, and additionally a breast-cover and an undershirt.”

Vinayasūtra Autocommentary (Bapat-Gokhale edition) 1.601

6. Restrictions regarding practices such as meditation

For Jain nuns, certain ascetic postures are prohibited:

“A nun may not take up the standing posture of penance, not stand like a statue, not thus sit down, not squat, not sit like a hero, not sit like a stick, not like a cudgel, not lie face down, not supine, not bent like a mango, or on one side.”

Bṛhatkalpa-sūtra 5.20-30

Saṅghadāsa’s commentary on this:

“Only the kind of ascetic practice which does not violate the other [vows] is allowed. [Seeing the nun in a posture of ascetic practice], someone might pursue her even if she is unwilling. That is why undertaking them as a vow is prohibited.”

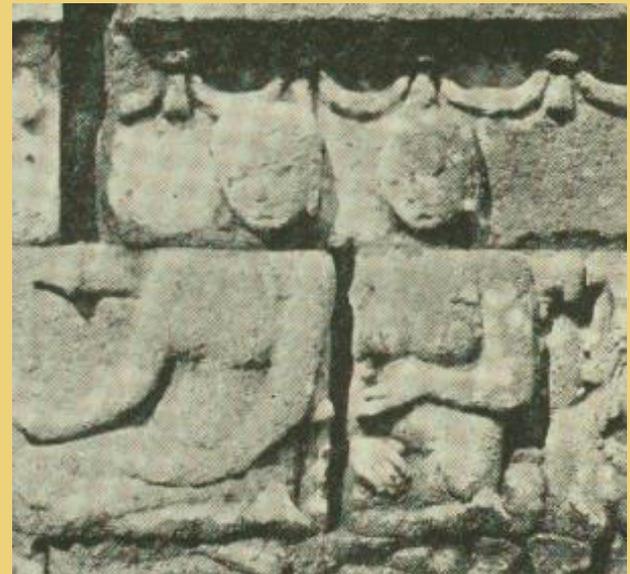
Bṛhatkalpa-bhāṣya 5957

For Buddhist nuns, different meditation posture:

“A nun should not meditate in a house with open doors. [...] This applies even if she has a companion. [...]

For a female, instead of the cross-legged posture, the half-cross-legged posture—regarding that: It means that one should sit in meditative contemplation in the half-cross-legged posture instead of the cross-legged posture.”

Vinayasūtra 17.371-72



Justifications for nuns' inferior status, greater restrictions, and monks' control

- the perception that women are more fickle, prone to pride, sensual
- perception of physical/sexual vulnerability of women outside of the family home
- nuns associated/confused with prostitutes and match-makers
- the context of patriarchal culture in pre-modern India: men's honor affected by the women's conduct (especially sexual control)

Nuns associated/confused with prostitutes and match-makers

“A nunnery should be constructed inside a town. She should not stand at its door. Its—the nunnery’s. She—the nun. Nor at a viewing-window—[she should not] stand [there].”

Vinayasūtra 17.362-65

Cf. *Kāmasūtra* includes a woman who stands at the door in its list of women “who can be easily had.” (5.1.52).

“If two old nuns, or one young one and one old one, or two young ones, or one old and one young [go for alms], [they commit faults.] ‘A secret stays [a secret] as long as it remains within four ears.’ Even in case of old nuns, there would be the fault of suspicion [about them acting as messengers]. In the second case, ‘She is accompanied by her bawd.’ In the third and fourth cases: ‘[They are] messengers.’”

Bṛhatkalpa-bhāṣya 2087-88

Monks implicated in nuns' reputation

“Look, these women who seek refuge in the ascetics' grove dwell in such a contemptible place! What do you think of this kind of dharma?’ Thus there would be censure against the Teacher.

The monks would also be reviled, and wicked people would ridicule those who support them. Those who were headed towards [renunciation] change their minds, and daughters of good families return [home].”

Brhatkalpa-bhāṣya 2316-17

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