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# CONTENTS

## I. ARTICLES

1. Religion, Kinship and Buddhism: Ambedkar's Vision of a Moral Community  
by Anne M. Blackburn 1
2. Vasubandhu on *saṃskārapratyayaṃ vijñānam*  
by Robert Kritzer 24
3. Is It a Crow (P. *dhaṃka*) or a Nurse (Skt. *dhātrī*), or Milk (Skt. *kṣīra*)  
or a Toy-Plough (P. *vaṃka*)?  
by Stephan H. Levitt 56

## II. REVIEW ARTICLE

- Issues on the Field of East Asian Buddhist Studies: An Extended Review  
of *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese  
Thought*, ed. Peter N. Gregory (T. Griffith Foulk) 93

## III. BOOK REVIEWS

1. *Collected Papers, vol. 2*, by K. R. Norman (Nirmala Salgado) 183
2. *The Dating of the Historical Buddha. Die Datierung des Historischen  
Buddha*, part I, ed. Heinz Bechert (A. K. Narain) 187
3. *Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation  
of Women*, by Padmanabh S. Jaini (Serinity Young) 202

## IV. RESEARCH TOOLS

- A Bibliography of Buddhist Materials in the Recorded Sound Collection  
of the Library of Congress  
by Floyd B. Hooker 209

## V. NOTES AND NEWS

- IABS Financial Statement, 1991 245

*Gender & Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women*, by Padmanabh S. Jaini Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991, 229 pp.

Padmanabh S. Jaini has assembled a fascinating and significant anthology of six Jaina texts on the topic of *strīmokṣa*, the salvation of women. The texts date from c. 150 C.E. to c. 1700 and one of the many rewards of this collection is the historical unfolding of the arguments. Specialists will rejoice in the copious notes while non-specialists can easily sample the original texts. In his preface Robert Goldman points out the value of texts such as these for filling in the early social history of India, a history he describes as having been misrepresented by scholarly studies exclusively based on the normative texts of Brahmanical culture and not giving due weight to those of the Jains, Buddhists, and Ājīvikas.

Jainism is perhaps best known for its radical formulation of *ahimsā*, non-injury to living things, to the point where Jaina ascetics may eventually starve themselves to death, and for the nudity of some of its monastics, the sky-clad (Digambaras) who contrast with the white cloth-clad (Śvetāmbaras). Not surprisingly, the debate about the spiritual qualifications of women often focuses on the issue of nudity. Importantly, the nudity of male ascetics was and continues to be acceptable in Indian society. The nudity of women was and remains highly problematic.

The Jaina texts are interesting both for the arguments they put forward about women's spiritual abilities and for the ways in which they formulate their arguments. For instance, Śākatāyana, a ninth century defender of women's spiritual abilities said that women's spiritual inabilities cannot be proved through either "perception, inference, or scriptural testimony." (pp. 49-50) These are exactly the types of evidence that are almost universally used in such arguments. Scriptural testimony, though, turns out to be rather malleable, as is shown in another ninth century Jaina text that sets itself against women's spiritual abilities:

Q: How do you then reconcile your position with the sutra text which says that all fourteen *gunasthānas* [the fourteen stages of spiritual development] are possible for a woman?

A: The word "manuṣiṅsi" [woman] in the sutra means a man who is characterized as psychologically female (*bhāvastrīviśista-manuṣya*); he may be called a woman because he experiences the female libido (*strīveda*). (p. 110)

We are all familiar with these exegetical strategies.

Essentially the Śvetāmbaras (clothed) support the spiritual abilities of women while the Digambaras (nude) oppose it. The Digambaras argue that women are inherently inferior to men and therefore cannot achieve salvation, and they offer four reasons or proofs to support this claim.

1. Women differ morally from men in that they cannot commit the extremely impure acts that men can; consequently women cannot be born into the lowest hell. Jaina cosmology posits three realms: various hells, the earth, and various heavens. The hells and heavens are multi-layered: the lowest hell is for the worst acts and the highest heaven for the purest acts. The argument follows that since women's moral nature prevents them from being born in the lowest hell, therefore, as an act of cosmic balance, their moral nature prevents them from being born in the highest heaven. In other words, being more temperate morally than men is perceived as a limitation—if they cannot be as bad they cannot be as good. The Digambara argument reads:

The excellence of knowledge and so forth, required for *mokṣa*, is not found in women;  
because such excellence and so forth must have absolute perfection;  
just as women lack the ultimate extreme of demerit,  
which is the immediate cause of rebirth in the seventh hell. (They therefore also lack the absolute perfection required for attaining *mokṣa*.)  
(P. 9)

2. Both the Digambaras and the Śvetāmbaras agree that *mokṣa* can only be achieved by being a monastic, but for the Digambaras, monastics must be nude and this is their second reason why women cannot achieve salvation—because they cannot be nude. For the Digambaras clothes indicate a clinging to possessions and the mendicant must be free of all such things. Both sects deny women nudity, but the Śvetāmbaras still allow women to become mendicants and therefore have access to salvation. Significantly, Śvetāmbara monks are not nude either, which for the Digambaras means they are not mendicants, so by arguing in favor of clothed nuns, the Śvetāmbaras are also arguing for clothed monks. Obviously this was a significant factor in the debate about women. Since this whole debate was in the hands of men, in a sense the Śvetāmbaras were arguing for themselves, not just for women.

3. Women have inferior skill in debating. Actually, women were not allowed to participate in debates, although Jaini finds evidence for women participating in debates in the *Uttarādhyaṇa Sūtra*. Jaina debates were more than a measure of scholarship; they also involved the summoning of occult powers in order to defeat opponents, and such powerful public displays by women were highly problematic.

4. Their inferior position in society and the ecclesiastical order. The Digambaras argue further against the spiritual potential of women based on the inferior status of women within Indian society. For example, because of the rule of primogeniture only sons, not daughters, may inherit a king's throne and in every household the man, not the woman, is the master of the house. The idea seems to be that women's inferior social position reflects her inferior spiritual position.

From time to time Jaini also informs the reader about other aspects of the actual lives of Jaina women, such as when he discusses the rules governing Jaina nuns, rules which appear to be remarkably similar to those of the Buddhist nuns. For instance, the Śvetāmbaras, supporters of the full liberation of women, require the following:

Even if a nun is ordained for a hundred years she must pay homage to a young monk, even if that monk has been ordained that very day, by going forth to meet him and by greeting him in reverence. (p. 20)

Since the texts in this book focus on Jaina nuns it is a particularly valuable source for comparative studies with Buddhist nuns. The fact that at the time of Mahāvira a much higher percentage of nuns (all clothed) than monks existed in the Jaina monastic communities, a percentage that holds today among the Śvetāmbara sect, prompts questions about the Jaina community and the Buddhist community. For instance, what effect does their being in the majority have on the Jaina understanding of women's spiritual abilities? Did their superior numbers keep this debate alive? Why has the order of Jaina nuns survived while the demise of the order of Buddhist nuns has been widespread since at least medieval times? While Jaini does not go into these questions, the materials he is presenting will be of enormous help to scholars working on women in South Asia. This study of Jaina women creates new questions for the study of South Asian women in general and helps us to look at old questions in new ways. For instance, learning that Jaina women can no longer participate in debates, though Jaini finds evidence that they did in the past, leads one to reflect on the importance of debating in Buddhism and to wonder if (a) this limitation was placed on Buddhist nuns (probably) and (b) if so, how significantly did that contribute to the decline of the order of Buddhist nuns? Such debates were often public events which helped focus the attention of the laity on the monastic orders and often led to contributions. Falk's study of the decline of the Buddhist order of nuns in India<sup>1</sup> suggests that the contributions from the laity were significantly less for nuns than for the monks, thereby hastening the end of the order of nuns. Not being able to debate could have had economic effects as far reaching as the spiritual effects.

The elaborate discussions about why a female body prevents one from achieving *mokṣa* provide a much needed background for the shorter Buddhist discussions as to whether liberation can be achieved in a female body, as for instance in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. Both the Jains and the Buddhists list types of beings that are restricted to men, and these lists are used in arguments about the ability of women to achieve *mokṣa*. The Buddhists have the five ranks, listed in chapter 11 of the *Lotus Sūtra* as: Brahmā, Indra, a guardian of the four quarters (these three are all divine beings), a Cakravartin (world conqueror), and a Bodhisattva. In Sanskrit these words are all masculine. The Jains, in turn, have a list of the five great illustrious beings which includes two of those in the Buddhist

list, the Cakravartin and Indra, and adds the great hero, his faithful brother, and the Tirthankara, none of whom can be female. This helps us to understand that what appears to be a narrow sectarian view is really part of a pan-Indian attitude toward women. This was not, however, taken as the final word on the subject, and Jaini's pithy analysis of the Buddhist positions in relation to the Digambara and Śvetāmbara positions is eye-opening. One important distinction, though, exists between the Jaina and Buddhist positions on women's spiritual potential: while Buddhist scriptures preserve a positive statement on the spiritual potential of women attributed to the Buddha on the occasion of the founding of the order of nuns, no documents exist which show that Mahāvira was ever questioned on this point.

Similarly, the frequent references to Sitā, the Hindu heroine, as an example of a spiritually accomplished woman, show the Jains dealing with a major internal sect difference and, at the same time, defining themselves in relation to the Hindu society that surrounds them. And, in the same way as the Jaina discussion sheds light on the Buddhist and Hindu discussion, it also fits in with and sharpens our focus on discussions about the nature of women from other times and places, such as Aristotle's biological arguments. Jaini's very particularized and detailed study awakens within the reader unpleasant memories of the various other religious, philosophical and scientific analyses that have denigrated women throughout the centuries. The fourth point of Mary Daly's seven-point analysis of the ways patriarchy undermines women is obsessive and compulsive attention to detail used to dehumanize women.<sup>2</sup> Here, among these Jaina texts, is another example of just that. The arguments of the Digambaras discuss details about women as if these details were the very essence of women and in the process they lose sight of women as living human beings whom they are denying access to salvation. For instance, the earliest text (c. 150 C.E.) presented by Jaini, and therefore the first extant Jaina text to deny women mendicant status, states:

#7 In the genital organs of women, in between their breasts, in their navels, and in the armpits, it is said (in the scriptures that) there are very subtle living beings. How can there be the mendicant ordination (*pravrajyā*) for them (since they must violate the vow of *ahimsā*) [by crushing these beings through the simple everyday motions of their bodies]?

#8 Women have no purity of mind; they are by nature fickle-minded. They have menstrual flows. (Therefore) there is no meditation for them free from anxiety. (p. 35)

This text is quoted as scriptural authority and elaborated upon 1500 years later:

Moreover, it is said in the scriptures that on account of the constant flow of the menstrual blood, various types of minute beings are generated in the

genitals of women; this also occurs on other parts of her body, such as her breasts. For this reason, women suffer from constant itching caused by these beings (which does not allow) them ever to have any cessation of sexual desire. Harm also occurs to those minute beings due to the destruction brought upon them. How therefore can a woman assume the *mahāvratas* (of a mendicant when she cannot be totally free from sexual desire or causing injury to living beings)? (p. 166)

These ideas about women's bodies lead to the notion that through the physical contact of sex, women cause men to kill millions of these minute beings when men rub against their skin and inside their vaginas.

Both sects agree, though, that one of the fundamental causes of being born a woman is having committed vices, such as cheating and crookedness, in other lives. In other words, women are associated with cunning. Secondly, once a person, female or male, is so advanced spiritually that they have generated the Jaina view of reality, called *samyaktva*, they cannot be reborn as a female. The highest wisdom, short of liberation itself, erases any femaleness.

In conclusion, Jaina discussions as to whether or not women can achieve salvation require defining first what leads to salvation for men; only then can one argue that women either have or lack the same spiritual capacities as men or not. In other words, the debate, in the end, centers on what it takes to achieve salvation. A sidebar to this debate, but one that continues to appear down through the centuries, is the discussion it generates about hermaphrodites, who are denied initiation as mendicants by both sects. One Digambara text makes an explicit connection between hermaphrodites and women:

*Mokṣa* having the characteristic (of the Four Infinities, knowledge, perception, bliss, and energy) is possible only for men and not for women. This is because, like the hermaphrodite, she is unfit for it and because of the impossibility of establishing any proof for the existence of that *mokṣa*. (p. 114)

Such an argument shows its androcentric bias: the religious hero is exclusively male; women and other non-males, such as hermaphrodites, are deviant.

#### Notes

1. Nancy Auer Falk, "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism," in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*, eds. Nancy A. Falk & Rita M. Gross (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

2. Mary Daly *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

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