



Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women

Padmanabh S. Jaini

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Is a total renunciation of clothing a prerequisite to attaining salvation? In *Gender and Salvation*, P. S. Jaini brings to light heretofore untranslated texts centering on a centuries-old debate between the two principal Jaina sects, the Digambaras and the Svetambaras. At the core of the debate is the question: should gender-based differences of biology and life experience condition or limit an individual's ability to accomplish the ultimate religious goal?

For the Digambaras, the example of total nudity set by Mahavira (599-527 B.C.), the central spiritual figure of Jainism, mandates an identical practice for all who aspire to the highest levels of religious attainment. For the Svetambaras, the renunciation necessary occurs purely on an internal level and is neither affected nor confirmed by the absence of clothes. Both sects agree, however, that nudity is not permitted for women under any circumstances. The Digambaras, therefore, believe that a woman cannot attain salvation, while the Svetambaras believe they can. Through their analysis of this dilemma, the Jaina thinkers whose texts are translated here demonstrate a level of insight into the material and spiritual constraints on women that transcends the particular question of salvation and relates directly to current debates on the effects of gender in our own society.

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