


3-22-2016

# The Transformations and Challenges of a Jain Religious Aspirant from Layperson to Ascetic: An Anthropological Study of Shvetambar Terapanthi Female Mumukshus

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**DOI:** 10.25148/etd.FIDC000244

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE TRANSFORMATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF A JAIN RELIGIOUS  
ASPIRANT FROM LAYPERSON TO ASCETIC: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
STUDY OF SHVETAMBAR TERAPANTHI FEMALE MUMUKSHUS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

by

Komal Ashok Kumar

2016

To: Dean John F. Stack  
Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs

This thesis, written by Komal Ashok Kumar, and entitled The Transformations and Challenges of a Jain Religious Aspirant from Layperson to Ascetic: An Anthropological Study of Shvetambar Terapanthi Female Mumukshus, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Christine E. Gudorf

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Steven M. Vose, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 22, 2016

The thesis of Komal Ashok Kumar is approved.

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Dean John F. Stack  
Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs

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Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2016

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## DEDICATION

To my parents, Ashok Kumar and Pushpalatha Bohra, for encouraging in me the ability, to trust and hope for an amazing life and for letting me accept the opportunities and the knowledge to fulfil my dream. And to my brother, Kuldeep, for teaching and showing me to make the most of every day, and to be thankful for every moment and every one in my life.

To the strong, enthusiastic and kindhearted Acharya Mahashraman, Jain sadhvis, samanias and mumukshus of the Shvetambar Terapanth, for without all of you and your tireless efforts to create a better world this thesis would never have been even a notion of a thought in my mind.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to extend my deepest and sincere gratitude to each and every individual who helped me in my thesis journey. To the Parmarthik Shikshan Sanstha, I could not have gathered as much data and insight about the aspirants and nuns without the assistance of this institute. To Acharya Mahasharmanji, for the blessing and the motivational words which helped me to accept the challenge to understand the congregation. To Sadhvi Pramukha Kanakprabhaji for giving me spiritual motherly advice and giving me the courage to carry on. To my former sister, Sadhvi Siddharprabhaji, for the advice, guidance and mental strength to face every struggle in this thesis journey. I cannot forget Samani Shukla Prajna, Samani Unnata Prajna and Samani Rohit Prajna, who have been my mental and physical strength during my stay in Miami, far from my homeland. To all other Samanijis for giving the immense spiritual guidance and explaining to me the functioning of the institute during my stay at Ladnun. I thank them for the tireless efforts in assisting me with hours and hours of discussion for my better understanding.

I thank Dr. Steven Vose. I cannot imagine where this thesis and I would be without his undying support and belief in my project and me. He has been more than my guiding light throughout my MA journey. He was my moral support through thick and thin. Words cannot describe how he helped me to survive the storm and finish on top. Thank you to my other committee members, Dr. Christine Gudorf and Dr. Albert Wuaku. They both have truly shown me what excitement and pure interest manifests into. I cannot picture the process of developing this thesis without the entire committee's dedication, engagement and mentorship. I am grateful to the Religious

Studies department at Florida International University. Dr. Oren Stier, Dr. Erik Larson, Dr. Nathan Katz, Prof. Daniel Alvarez and all my professors contributed to this project and my academic and personal development in their own unique ways.

I wish to thank Rajiv and Latika Jain, whose fellowship funded my studies at FIU. I also thank the Jain Education and Research Foundation (JERF), which provided funding for my research in summer 2015. I thank them for recognizing the great potential and contribution of my work to the academic field. I hope and believe the investment made in my research and myself has proven to be valuable to the world at large.

I would like to thank my friends for unquestioning love and friendship. Thank you for believing in me and for the ample amounts of much needed comic relief and for serving as my family away from home. Thank you to all my family and friends for providing light, warmth and laughter on this journey.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE TRANSFORMATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF A JAIN RELIGIOUS  
ASPIRANT FROM LAYPERSON TO ASCETIC: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
STUDY OF SHVETAMBAR TERAPANTHI FEMALE MUMUKSHUS

by

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Florida International University, 2016

Miami, Florida

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This thesis explores the challenges that Shvetambar Terapanthi Jain female mumukshus (religious aspirants) face during their training at the Parmarthik Shikshan Sanstha, an institute unique to this sect dedicated to training young females to become nuns. The educational requirements, secluded social environment, disciplined rules, and monastic hierarchies train aspirants to understand the demands of nunhood. Based on interviews and observations, aspirants express their struggle to balance the personal desire to progress spiritually toward liberation (moksha) that motivated them to renounce with the requirement to raise their juniors as part of the ascetic community, a new kind of familial structure. The disparity in the training of female and male renouncers in the Terapanth reveals problems that remain in the gendered way female renouncers are treated in their training. Renunciation is shown not to be gender neutral, leading to a more nuanced understanding of Jain asceticism in contemporary India.



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## Introduction

It was 4:00 a.m., Chennai; I had just reached my home after a long journey from Miami. My family was all excited about my arrival, and so was I to meet my family. My dad and I were seated on the sofa, my mom and brother on the other end; I could make out that they wanted to say something, all three staring at each other, but none uttered a word. I asked, “What’s that you want to speak?” Then I heard from my dad, “We wouldn’t want you to visit Kathmandu. Situations are worse there because of earthquake. You concentrate on any other field but forget Nepal.” I was completely taken aback. I completely understood their concern for me, but I had to convince them and finally did. I would leave the next day.

Still, I was not ready to meet the ascetics I would be interviewing face-to-face as an ethnographer, as all these years I had met them as a *shravika*, a Jain laywoman. Not only ascetics, I would also meet a few young women whom I had known personally as *shravikas* who were now aspirants—*upasikas* and *mumukshus*.<sup>1</sup> To speak to them as a *shravika* was quite easy, but tomorrow as an ethnographer would be a big challenge. The biggest challenge was to face my own former sister, who is now an ascetic, as an ethnographer and not as a sister or a fellow *shravika*. Only then did I realize and feel the challenge. It was not just ethnographic interviews and observations that I would be taking. With the idea of writing an ethnography about the girls and women who embark on the journey of becoming Jain ascetics, *sadhvis* and *samanis*, I was overwhelmed—would it be too hard, too elusive to observe?

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<sup>1</sup> *Mumukshu*: a seeker with a desire for liberation (*moksha*). In the Terapanth, a *mumukshu* is an aspirant who desires to become a monk (*sadhu*) or nun (*sadhvi*) and who undertakes formal training. *Upasaka/-ika*: one who meditates, an aspirant, worshipper. In the Terapanth, an *upasika* is a female aspirant in the first calendar year of formal training.

Despite my trepidation, I was ready to accept the challenge, excited to venture out of my comfort zone and observe a different aspect of my culture. I hoped to get to know the aspirants and develop an understanding of what renunciation is about. I felt as if I were preparing for the most difficult finals of my life.

Having lived in Miami for a year, upon reaching Nepal I had to overcome jetlag. I landed at the Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu. The airport was full of commotion; at the baggage claim I could see people were sending donations to help the country affected by the recent earthquake. Collecting my baggage, I came out of the airport to hail a taxi. The taxi driver had no idea where the Jain Bhawan in Kamal Pokhari, Gyaneshwor (a district in Kathmandu) was located. I had expected this would happen because every year when I travelled to visit Acharya Mahashraman, the leader of the Shvetambar Terapanth sect, taxi drivers always behaved as though I was an alien, and would ask every passerby possible if they knew the location I was mentioning—in Nepali. And like every other time, the driver at the end said, “Oh, yeah, *jagah* (this place)?” I reached the Bhawan only to find it completely empty. Upon asking where I could meet the mendicants, the watchman at the door guided me elsewhere. The Bhawan is where Acharya Mahashraman regularly gave sermons and where the monks and nuns usually resided while in Nepal. A new place was allocated after the earthquake because the Bhawan had partly collapsed due to the earthquake.

Sermons are given in the morning, 9:00-11:00 a.m. and in the evening after *Arhat Vandana* (“Homage to *Arhats*”).<sup>2</sup> Wherever the Acharya travels, the place

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<sup>2</sup> To pay homage with devotion is known as *Vandana*. When expressed towards the *arhat*, who has conquered attachment and aversion, it is known as *Arhat Vandana*. This prayer was composed by

where sermons are delivered and his residence would be either the same place or nearby and reachable by walking. As I reached there around noon, however, I had to visit him at the monks' residence.

The Bhawan is spacious enough because it has to house the Acharya of the congregation and the large retinue of monks and nuns who travel with him from Delhi on this annual visit to Nepal; people from all over the country visit him. Now, because of the earthquake, all *sadhvis* (nuns) and *sadhus* (monks) had to fit into two smaller buildings nearby. I was told about their experience of the earthquake and how the mendicants now had to live in the smaller quarters. Though the building for the *sadhvis* was small, it had many rooms. Outside all of the rooms, the names of the *sadhvis* were written to make it easier to find them—it was the same in the building where the *sadhus* stayed. After I met the Acharya, I was allocated a room nearby to stay, and wondered how one could still dare to stay in such a chancy and unsafe place. The demonstration of valor by the ascetics of the Terapanth sect in accepting the challenges of this earthquake seemed heroic. How do Jains come to present themselves as models of the Jain ideal of renunciation? How could one desire to renounce? What is renunciation for one aspiring to leave the world to lead an ascetic life?

A conference meeting was held among the laity and mendicants to address the issue of whether to let or not to let mendicants use transportation to move from Nepal

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Acharya Tulsi in 1968. The basis of *Arhat Vandana* is the teachings of Lord Mahavir. It starts with the *Namaskar Sutra* and ends with the *Mangal Sutra*. The remaining verses are selected maxims found within the *Agams*, the Jain sacred scriptures. This prayer is directed towards those who have realized the omniscient power in an effort to help move the worshipper towards the goal of self-realization (Samani Prasana Pragya and Samani Rohit Pragya 2008, 7).

to a safe zone. All were welcome to express their views. Though there were suggestions from the lay members of the congregation that the ascetics leave Nepal with the use of transportation, the Acharya did not have the audacity to break the vow all Jain ascetics take not to use any conveyance other than their own bare feet. In spite of all these challenges, I still felt his bliss and aura of tranquility. It was interesting to see that though the monks expressed their views, the nuns never did. Several nuns later told me that any decision from the Acharya would stand final and the entire congregation would follow his guidance. Another interesting thing I noticed was that some monks were assigned responsibilities to handle the media and press and other public relations issues related to the earthquake. I began to think more about the gendered nature of renunciation, as monks were assigned special roles regarding the situation while nuns had only to continue with their routine. This seemed to reinforce the common image that Terapanthi female renouncers' major duty is simply to show devotion to the Guru. Indeed, nuns and female aspirants often confess and believe that showing devotion and respect to the Guru and to the congregation will lead them to understand right faith, right knowledge and right conduct—the three jewels of Jainism. Still, I wondered if that was all there was to being a Terapanthi nun. I felt I would never stop thinking about it unless I asked them.

### **The Shevtambar Terapanth Congregation**

A recent sect, formed in 1765 CE, the Terapanth is a community of Shvetambar Jain monks (*sadhus*), nuns (*sadhvis*), laymen (*shravaks*) and laywomen (*shravikas*), a complete “fourfold order” (*caturvidh sangh*) in the classical formulation (A.K. Jain 2009, 146; Sadhvi Kanakprabhaji 2004, 6). The distinctiveness of this sect was “*ek*

*guru, ek vidhan*” (“Under the guidance of one Guru”) (Acharya Mahaprajna 1993, 2).<sup>3</sup> The sect was formed by Acharya Bhikshu (1726-1803) to follow, observe and practice the strictest *ahimsa* (non-violence), the central tenet of Jainism, to all creatures, exemplified by the mendicants’ practice of wearing the *muhpatti* (cloth covering the mouth) at all times except during food intake. He initiated some 56 nuns and 46 monks from other sects, chiefly the Sthankavasi from which he broke (A.K. Jain 2009, 146). These numbers were a portent of success for the growth of the Terapanth sect. The order has since followed a chain of Acharyas. The sect underwent a major transformation from 1936 to 1997 under the guidance of the ninth guru, Acharya Tulsi, (1914-1997), known as the “Revolutionary Sadhu” (ibid.). Until Acharya Mahashraman, Acharya Tulsi, held the record for initiating the highest number of monks and nuns in the history of the order. Acharya Tulsi was the inspiration behind the founding of the Jain Vishwa Bharti Institute (JVBI), a Jain university, located in his hometown of Ladnun, a small town in northern Rajasthan (Acharya Mahaprajna 2005, 429). He also started the Anuvrat Movement. He directed Muni Nathmal, who later became Acharya Mahaprajna, to rediscover the ancient art of meditation, called “*preksha*” (“to perceive profoundly”) (Acharya Mahaprajna 2008, 1). Acharya Tulsi also began a new order of initiates within the congregation, the *saman* and *samani*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The actual script says “*ek guru ki agya main rahe,*” which means to follow the path showed by one Acharya. The slogan, “*ek guru, ek vidhaan*” was given by Acharya Tulsi to express the centrality of a single acharya leading the group. All ascetics within the Terapanth congregation must abide by what the acharya of the congregation decides. Ascetics are free to discuss their views, but his word stands final. This sect was formed from the separation of the Sthankavasi sect of Jainism.

<sup>4</sup> *Samana* is the title given to males; *samani* to females. *Samana*, meaning “striver” in Prakrit (Skt., *shramana*), comes from the ancient name for the group of renouncer traditions that rejected the authority of the Vedas and the efficacy of animal sacrifice, including Jains and Buddhists. As a title for this class of renouncers, it is said to have two meanings: from *shramana*, it refers to a division of the

In 1980, the late Acharya Tulsi, along with his then-Yuvacharya (appointed successor), Mahaprajna, established a second ordination level, *samani diksha*. This level was established for two main purposes. Due to the overwhelming number of Jains living abroad, it was created to provide spiritual care and support for them. Secondly, as a result of increased interest in religious and spiritual ideas, Terapanthi Jains wanted a class of ordained scholar-educators who could participate in the various religious and academic conferences being held worldwide. As fully ordained Jain renunciants are prohibited from using transportation other than their own two feet, participation in global religious conferences was not possible. Acharya Tulsi wanted to rectify this dilemma; hence, the creation of the *saman* and *samani* order (Acharya Mahaprajna, 2012, 31; A.K. Jain 2009, 147). Today there are seventy-five *samanis* and just one *saman*.

### **The *Parmarthik Shikshan Sanstha* – Institute for Training in the Religious Life**

One of the most contested new ideas Acharya Tulsi introduced to the Terapanth is the *Parmarthik Shikshan Sanstha* ('Institute for Training in the Religious Life,' PSS)—an institute for training *mumukshus*, those aspiring to join the monastic order; it is located on the Jain Vishwa Bharti campus in Ladnun. The literal meaning of *mumukshu* is "*moksh ki iccha*" ("one who has the desire to achieve *moksha*"). While it was begun to train both male and female aspirants, the PSS has been attended overwhelmingly by women and girls; today it is exclusively for them. The goal with

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fourfold *shramana sangha*, specifically the renouncer order of the *shramana* traditions; it is the man who observes the *mahavrata*s (great vows); from *samana*, one who sees (feels) all living beings (souls) as equal (*sama*) to his own soul (Acharya Mahashraman 2014, 262; Acharya Mahashraman and Muni Mahendra Kumar 2009, 352).



which this institute was formed was to provide “education before renunciation” (Shanta 1986). Though since its inception this institute has been almost exclusively attended by females, some male aspirants were trained at the PSS in its initial years. While it was not mandatory for male aspirants to get trained at the PSS, it has been mandatory for female aspirants since its founding.

Among the sectarian divisions of the Jain religion, one can visibly see the differences in the practices of renunciation and the ascetic life, though the goal remains the same—to attain liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of death and rebirth known as *samsara*. The differences in ascetic practices do not begin after one renounces the world, but start long before, when a person becomes a *mumukshu*, an aspirant to renunciation, one who perceives worldly pleasure as an illusion and who believes that renunciation is the best way to get out of the cycle of birth and death. In the Terapanth sect, a *mumukshu* receives training at the PSS. She receives education in Jain doctrine and the practices of the ascetic life in the setting of a kind of boarding school in which aspirants undertake a quasi-mendicant lifestyle. While the other sects train their *mumukshus* in an apprenticeship model, having them follow and live like fully ordained monks and nuns, the Terapanth uniquely has this school to train aspirants. This study will focus on their experiences.

My major focus is to understand the aspirants who have received training at the institute over the past 10 years (2005-2015). This thesis addresses the challenges *mumukshus* face with relation to their physical, emotional and psychological issues that arise as part of this lifestyle transition. *Mumukshus* often say that they renounced because of *vairagya* (dispassion for worldly things leading to the desire for

renunciation), but upon arriving at PSS find that they are once again “in the world” because they are expected to raise their juniors. In this sense, we get the view that what it means to be an ascetic is not merely to progress spiritually on a personal level, but to discipline oneself into a monastic order that necessarily includes mutual responsibility toward others through hierarchy as a necessary part of their training. No ascetic is alone, but is always understood to be located in a community of aspirants, in which they will remain as ascetics. I will explore how they negotiate the differences between the rhetoric of renunciation, which tends to couch seeking liberation as an individual endeavor, and the practicalities of the day-to-day life of a *mumukshu*, in which their training reinforces mutual interdependence.

Further, the aspirants, though they seem to be mentally ready for this change, are often at a tender age when they arrive at the PSS, and usually lack the experience of the daily routine of the renunciant life.<sup>5</sup> The educational requirements, secluded social environment, monastic hierarchies, and strict, highly disciplined rules serve as an all-encompassing method of training. The challenges that this lifestyle presents to young girls as they proceed on the path include balancing the aspirant’s desire to progress spiritually with the requirements of leading their junior aspirants. In this sense, we see that what it means to be an ascetic is not merely to progress spiritually on a personal level, but to discipline oneself into a monastic order that necessarily includes mutual responsibility toward others through hierarchy. No aspirant is alone, but is always understood to be located in a community of ascetics, in which they will remain after ordination. This runs contrary to the rhetoric of renunciation within the

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<sup>5</sup> The youngest aspirant I interviewed is 11 years old; the eldest is 30.

Terapanth as well as the predominant scholarly understanding of Jain asceticism, which frames renunciation as a personal quest for *moksha*. Through interviews with current *mumukshus*, this field study will depict a new way of understanding how Jain asceticism works in contemporary India.

The PSS was an innovation, a step to educate aspirants in the congregation and to create knowledgeable ascetics who can speak on behalf of the tradition in international forums and address the present generation in ways the laity understands. Institutionalized training for the aspirants enables them to lead an ascetic life in the modern world. Within the Terapanth congregation female aspirants must undergo institutionalized training. To join this institute there is no prescribed age limit or any educational qualification; the only requirement to join this institute is the aspiration to renounce the world. This institute undertakes the responsibility to train aspirants spiritually. It also trains them pastorally, that is, to be religious teachers of the Terapanth Community. Management and leadership skills are taught along with Jain doctrines and practices, giving aspirants a clear idea of the difference between aspiring to be an ascetic and actually being one. They quickly learn that they are not simply seeking their individual path to *moksha*, but are training to become clergy who teach, advise and counsel lay Jains and to promote the interests of the Terapanth outside the tradition through education, scholarship, and leadership of Jain communities in the diaspora, which are comprised of all sects.

The PSS is under both spiritual and administrative management. By spiritual management I mean that the Acharya, *sadhvis* and *samanis* are responsible for establishing the “curriculum” and for knowing the progress of each aspirant in the

institute. The right kind of spiritual knowledge and training each aspirant needs is given by the *samanis*, who are the main faculty to educate and train the *mumukshus*. By administrative management, I mean the laity is in charge of the finances and logistical operation of the PSS. From the cook to the manager of the PSS, they are in charge of the proper working of the institute and make sure aspirants live the life as it was designed to be lived. Since its inception, the rules and regulations governing the PSS—even its location—have changed periodically to adapt to the needs and realities of the *mumukshus* being trained there. If we compare the rules and regulations laid down during its inception and today, most of the changes served to tighten regulations to increase discipline (Shanta 1986). The general trend has been to close loopholes *mumukshus* had exploited and to increase (and in a few cases to decrease), the strictness of the discipline they live with. Some changes, for example, established uniform clothing for *upasikas* and *mumukshus*; others formalized educational training. Such strict rules and regulations definitely create anxiety for most aspirants before joining the institute, but upon joining the institute they realize that all these had been framed with a reason and purpose. As ascetics, they are learning to live within a strict code of conduct, with the *samitis* (limits) and *guptis* (restraints) that are at the heart of all ascetic mendicant orders including Jain, Buddhist and even Christian orders. Such rules are the focus of the earliest Jain canonical texts, such as the *Acharanga Sutra* (*achara* = conduct). No goal is easy to achieve; neither is the goal to live a life as an ascetic in order to reach *moksha*.

### ***Upasika, Mumukshu, Samani, Sadhvi* – Levels of Ordination**

There are two categories of religious females in the Terapanth, aspirants in training (*mumukshus* and *upasikas*) and women renouncers (*sadhvis* and *samanis*). Within the Terapanthi monastic hierarchy of female renouncers, there are two basic ranks of ordination for women, *sadhvi* and *samani*. Consequently, this allows for two types of initiation (*diksha*) ceremonies. *Sadhvi diksha* is the most traditional form of Jain female renunciation; this is for a fully ordained nun who takes the five Great Vows (*mahavrats*) to their fullest extent. The *samani diksha*, in which one takes the five vows (*vratas*) but to a somewhat lesser extent, will be discussed in more detail below.

Jain *sadhvis* are more than simply holy persons or virtuous women. They are fully ordained women who adhere to the Jain code of conduct. Similar to their fully ordained male counterparts, they are limited in the number of articles of clothing they can wear to three pieces, a skirt, blouse and extra-long *dupatta* (scarf or shawl). Full renunciation prohibits wearing shoes unless a medical issue is present, in which case permission from the Acharya must be obtained and additional penances must be observed. Transportation via vehicles is prohibited, due to the overwhelming number of living beings killed in its utilization. *Sadhvis* must go for *gochari* or alms, where they collect food from lay Jains. There are specific rules governing when, how, what and from whom a Jain renunciant may collect alms.

Individuals initiated under *samani* rank, female and male, hold a quasi- or semi-ordained status within the Terapanth tradition. They follow the same rules as *sadhvis* and *munis* with some exceptions. Unlike monks and nuns, they are allowed to take transportation. They are also allowed to consume food prepared specifically for

them. The other minor exceptions made for *samanis* concerns the practice of *kesh loch*, ritual removal of the hair from the head. *Sadhvis* must pluck the hair from their head only using their hands. *Samanis* have the option of using scissors, razors, shears or any other tools to remove their hair. *Samanis* can choose for themselves the manner in which they would like to go bald. Unlike *sadhvis*, *samanis* do not carry *mupasthika* (mouth covering) as a part of their dress. The fully ordained nuns and monks do *palevana* (inspection of clothes) twice a day, but it is not mandatory for *samanis*.

Within the ranks of female aspirants, the higher of the two is the *mumukshu*. Here we see that every six months the PSS chooses the head of all *mumukshus* to lead all the aspirants.<sup>6</sup> The previous leader reverts to being an ordinary *mumukshu*. This role is given by the head *samani* at the PSS, who chooses an aspirant to lead who has the leadership and management ability. The lower rank is called *upasika* (servant, follower). Every aspirant for the first year after joining the PSS is called an *upasika*; after this probationary period, they are called *mumukshu*. Since 2011, any aspirant under age 16 would be considered as a child aspirant; they are called “child *mumukshus*” (*bal mumukshu*). Similar to ascetics, *mumukshus* have restrictions in their dress code. Once an aspirant is a part of the PSS, whether a *mumukshu* or an *upasika*, they cannot wear any other dress apart from that of an aspirant. Upon getting approval for initiation, the aspirant is sent to live the last few days with family and relatives. During this period the aspirant can wear light colored clothes until they join

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<sup>6</sup> *Badebai* (elder sister): title given to the head *mumukshu* during the period, who is held responsible for every move of the *mumukshus*. If any aspirant has any concern, she has to first consult the *badebai* and then upon her advice should move further with her decision. The rule has since changed.

the monastic order. During the last few days the family members organize processions on the occasion of their loved one's leaving the material world and being a part of the monastic order.

### **Review of Literature**

Western academia has given us insight into many of the practices of Jain ascetics. What we do not have, however, is a clear picture of the ways in which practice itself enables female Jain renunciators to construct and legitimate their renunciant identities—the most difficult among the challenges facing this group today. In following the theoretical arguments of practice and performance theorists, my project contributes to the current state of knowledge on Terapanthi female aspirants' institutionalized training by presenting the performative constructions of their Jain renunciant identity, that is, the means by which they create, define, express, and communicate what renunciation is about.

Jaini (1991) translates texts that articulate the historical debates between the two major traditions in Jainism, the Shvetambar and Digambar, presenting key areas of consensus and disagreement between the sects. Digambara and Shvetambara agree that women are women because of detrimental karmas (especially deceit) as well as the fact that the female body is inherently violent. However, one key point of debate pertinent to this project is the rationale behind the Digambar assertion that women are incapable of being ascetics, based on the impossibility of their abandoning possessions completely, namely clothing, and their extremely demeritorious action. Further, Jaini analyzes the points of debate over whether liberation is possible for women, which Digambara deny and Shvetambara accept. However, due to his focus

solely on the textual discourse about liberation and women between the two sects, written exclusively by monks, his text does not include input from the women of each respective order. He does not address the transition of the aspirant's life from layperson to ascetic, nor are aspirants' or female ascetics' voices traceable in the texts that might help us to understand their motivations. As a result, we lack practical perspectives on how Jain female aspirants view gender and the ideologies they negotiate when making the decision to become a Jain ascetic.

Sethi (2012) examines the sexism behind why Jain female renouncers outnumber Jain male renouncers. She is able to explain why they choose to renounce, but not the methods they implement to act on their decision. She does not take into account the importance of the various congregations' use of institutions for training ascetics (or not), reasons behind the existence of a training institute (or lack thereof), the aspirants' individual background, or the happenings within the various congregations. The Terapanth is just a small part of Shvetambar Jainism and most still do not use this method to train ascetics.

Vallely (2002) explores the lives of *Terapanthi* nuns, providing western academia's first glance into the female gendered routines, symbols and practices of Jain female renouncers. Vallely examines Jain female practices to the extent of their symbolic issues, focusing especially on the meaning they ascribe to devotion to the Acharya as the key practice they engage in to achieve their soteriological goal. However, a detailed description of the PSS is missing in her work, which will be explored in this thesis. In addition to understanding the significance of the same symbolic structures that Vallely discusses for *sadhvis* in *mumukshus*' lives, my work



seeks to understand the personal challenges of an aspirant as she transitions to becoming a nun, such as age and psychological and cultural pressures. I also examine how these are handled on an institutional level. What provokes renunciation in young Terapanthi women? How do they live up to the expectations of the congregation, in which the community exerts a strong, perhaps conservative influence on women to uphold values, whether they are renunciants or laywomen? Vallely has shown how women have negotiated the patriarchal ideologies that cast women as sexual and emotional; Terapanthi nuns instead favor discourses that see women as inclined to spiritual pursuits. Vallely argues that it is through devotion to their leader and his teachings that Jain *sadhvis* understand and explain their life stories; she presents the symbolism and rhetorical discourse that women have used to reconstruct themselves in positive ways. Vallely's work concentrates on symbolic issues in the gendering of female renunciation via devotion in Jainism. My work, however, while it understands the significance that symbolic structures, including gender-sex systems, play in constituting what renunciation is all about, accentuates the role of practice in performance—what Jain *sadhvis* do in their ritualized lives as mendicants.

N. Shanta (1997) presents the life of a Jain *sadhvi* as one of radical renunciation, of which one of the hallmarks is incessant pilgrimage, a regular shifting from one place to the next in a sustained striving towards self-purification and the final goal of *moksha*. She also records many personal narratives of nuns, who tell us why and how they decided to renounce, and what the process was like for them, especially in how their parents responded. They also describe their training when in the aspirant stage. Taking a deep interest in spirituality, she finds in their narratives an

original and strictly defined spiritual path and teaching whose strength and subtlety merit our attention and invite us to embark on an authentic spiritual journey. However, as she focused solely on nuns from image-worshipping (*murtipujak*) Jain sects, which do not train their nuns as the Terapanth now does or have the *samani* class of nuns, her study is limited only to the training of nuns in the traditional “apprenticeship” model.

Additionally, I apply Geertz’s (1973) concept of “thick description” to understand the connection between the symbolic and the performative aspects of renunciation. Thick description is a means of cultural interpretation that examines specific details, conceptual structures and meanings within a culture; it is opposed to “thin description,” which is a factual account of a culture without any interpretation. Real insight into the culture of a people requires seeing it as more than “a storehouse of learning,” but, in fact, the webs of significance that connect their lives.

DeNapoli’s (2009) research on Hindu female ascetics introduces a performance-praxis model to understand the gendered practices of asceticism in light of the rhetoric of renunciation. Her theory provides me a model to understand the gendered nature of *mumukshus*’ institutionalized training by focusing on their actual training practices in the PSS in light of the “official discourse” that designates proper reasons for renunciation. I apply the performance and practice theoretical frameworks as an organizing and unifying thread in my thesis.

This thesis brings to light what renunciation is for an aspirant. How do Jain female aspirants decide upon renunciation as a career option rather than sticking to playing the role of wife and mother? The way in which they present their voices to be

heard makes a clear statement that renunciation is not something into which they were forced, but a way to lead a successful life for beneficial future lives.<sup>7</sup> While the recent ethnographic studies on Jain female renunciation have illustrated a number of important insights into the lives of Jain female renunciants, particularly the significance of practices of devotion and what it means to be a Jain *sadhvi*, existing scholarship mostly approaches Jain female renunciants' worlds and lives discursively, succeeding only in understanding the symbolic structures and their constructions. As a result, Western academia has significant amounts of research giving us insight into the teachings of Jain *sadhvis* and what they think. What we do not have, however, are the ways in which practice itself enables Jain *sadhvis* to construct, perform and legitimate their renunciant identities.

Though this institute is uniquely for females, I was curious to know why institutionalized training is only for females and not for males. Why has institutionalized training not been implemented for males? Every aspirant has to face the challenge of getting parental consent to renounce the world; in comparison with female aspirants, it is more difficult for male aspirants to convince their parents to allow them to renounce.<sup>8</sup> Remarkably, as a result of receiving formalized education, female aspirants have the advantage of being better educated than many male renouncers are. How do the aspirants take advantage of this situation, and how is this fact understood and handled in the monastic community? The Vice Chancellor of the Jain Vishva Bharati Institute (JVBI), for example, is a *samani*. This gives us a sense

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<sup>7</sup> *Moksha* is officially impossible now, so everyone has at least one more rebirth before moksha.

<sup>8</sup> Every aspirant, male or female, who aspires to join the Shvetamber Terapanth monastic order requires written consent both from the aspirant and from the parents before renouncing the world.

of what the result of having a large group of educated nuns has meant for the Terapanth. Though the mindset of males is different from that of females, how well do female ascetics' careers compare with the male ascetics', especially in light of their more formalized education and ascetic training?

## **Methodology**

With hopes of filling the lacuna present in academic literature on Jain female renunciation and their practices, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in North India, South India, and Kathmandu, Nepal, in order to gather observations of and interviews with the leaders of the Terapanth congregation, heads of the female ascetics, *sadhus*, *sadhvis*, and aspirants. At times I conducted group interviews. All these helped me in gathering the information for analysis. After conducting some ethnographic fieldwork in Kathmandu, I attended the International Summer School for Jain Studies six-week program. Following that, I traveled to Ladnun for further fieldwork and to attend their "Understanding Jainism Programme." My remaining time was spent there gathering data on the discourses and practices used by Jain nuns and aspirants to perform their renunciation.

I interviewed all the aspirants at the PSS as well as Acharya Mahashraman, Sadhvi Pramukha Kanakprabha (head of nuns), and many *sadhus* and *sadhvis* in Kathmandu, Jaipur, Delhi, and Chennai from May to August 2015. The ages of the participants ranged from 11 to 74 and came from almost all parts of India. I conducted interviews with *mumukshus* within and outside the PSS, supplemented with survey questionnaires and close observation of their daily routines. Interviews were conducted in English or Hindi, depending on the language expertise of the

interviewee. Interviews were mostly one-on-one; a few interviews were conducted in pairs or groups. If any aspirant had a sibling or any aspirant's interests matched with another's, they were interviewed together. All child aspirants were interviewed together in a group. This research is not confined only to current aspirants, but also includes interviews with those who witnessed the functioning of this institute over the last 10 years in order to gain a sense of the changes recently implemented in training techniques. The central question guiding each of the chapters is: How does the Terapanth's system of institutionalized training affect how female aspirants perceive their ability to attain their spiritual goals?

### **Plan of the Thesis**

This thesis helps us to understand the differences between the reality of women and cultural understandings of them. It is the Indian mindset that females are both inclined more towards religion and more emotional than males. The authority to make decisions has always resided with males, as females are thought to be too emotional, and therefore incapable of making some decisions. This brings to light that gendered differences exist within the mendicant life as well. This ethnographic research revealed to me several pathways and techniques Jain Shvetambar female renunciants implemented to renounce. These performances, main and corollary, consist of discursive constructions, practices and performances based on official, masculinist Jain discourses surrounding renunciation found in Jain doctrine. Women continually drew upon these discourses in their performances of Jainism, adapting and interweaving them with their own experiences. These experiences were dynamic and

heterogonous, occurring across a wide and vast spectrum, proving that there is no standard or universal path to Jain female renunciation.

Chapter 1 sketches the founding of the PSS in light of Acharya Tulsi's reforms of the Terapanth sect that stipulated "education before renunciation." I outline the history and purpose of the formation of this institute; the role played by the laity, the aspirants, the management and the congregation in the making of this institution; the change of rules and regulations since its inception, and the reasons why they were changed. The revisions made to the rules and regulations, which forms the curriculum for the aspirants, is meant to refine their habits and behavior; examining these changes gives us an idea of what is Terapanth trying to do with the implementation of institutionalized training. I then examine the importance attributed to training Jain female aspirants in this way, and the challenges faced not only by the aspirants but by the institution and the congregation. Finally, I begin to examine the discursive importance of cultivating "right faith" (*samyak darshana*) as crucial to focusing aspirants' on their training at the PSS that will result in their renunciation.

Chapter 2 is titled, "Understanding Karma and Renunciation as an Aspirant." This and the following two chapters establish the ways in which Jain women wishing to renounce practice and discuss their renunciate identities in relation to the three gems of Jainism: right faith, right knowledge and right conduct. This chapter provides insight into how Jain women perform their desire to renounce through practices and discursive constructions indicating *samyak darshana* or right faith. As right faith serves as the first gem of Jainism and must be obtained before being able to acquire the next two, it is pertinent to my project to establish how right faith is cultivated and

performed amongst Jain female renouncers. In doing so, I present the various reasons why Jain women renounce through their personal renunciation narratives and how they relate the development of *vairagya* (aspiration to renounce), mostly by focusing on how each sees karma playing out in their lives. Various types of karma play a lead role in how aspirants talk about cultivating *samyak darshan* (right faith), which becomes the precondition of *vairagya* and thus renunciation.

Chapter 3 is titled “Female Renouncers and Male Renunciation.” Nuns outnumber monks in the Terapanth (and in the Shvetambar tradition as a whole) by a 3:1 ratio.<sup>9</sup> If we look at the *samani* to *saman* ratio, it is 75:1. So why are only females given institutionalized training? Is it merely because of their greater numbers that they are trained in an institute? Though the Terapanth congregation has given many opportunities to nuns, why do the gendered differences and boundaries persist? Is there a scriptural precedent for them? Does there exist another reason beneath? Through analyses of the personal narratives of *mumukshus* and nuns, as well as an analysis of initiation rituals and other religious performances that aid in the creation of female renunciant identities and subjectivities, this chapter provides insight and knowledge of how Jain women occupy and negotiate their anomalous position within the Jain community and Indian society at large. This chapter highlights the use and application of symbolic structures to religious experience in order to understand their practices. This chapter will demonstrate how symbolic structures inherent in practice—namely strong will, right faith and *punya* (meritorious acts)—intersect in the performance of Jain renunciation, and how those characteristics contribute to

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<sup>9</sup> At present there are 551 nuns and 170 monks within the Terapanth congregation, a 3.2:1 ratio.

consolidating a religious identity that enables Jain women to feel they are ready to renounce the world.

Chapter 4, titled “Understanding Child Aspirants,” addresses the controversial legal issue of child initiation. This chapter will highlight the voices of the young kids who chose this path of renunciation. This chapter brings into focus the importance of *baldiksha* (child initiation) for the Jain community. I interviewed the child aspirants currently in the PSS who are under training, and examine the way the congregation and the institute is held responsible for the spiritual development of the children who would be the future of the monastic order. This chapter also brings out the tensions that older *mumukshus* expressed about having to raise their juniors, questioning whether this was appropriate to their spiritual progress. I argue that there are some unquestioned assumptions about women and girls’ “natural capacity” to be caretakers that has led the administration of the PSS to rely on senior *mumukshus* to care for the younger aspirants. This also reinforces the fact that nuns are not “free subjects” seeking liberation, but are members of another kind of community—the community of ascetics. I highlight the disparity between the aspirants’ motivation for seeking renunciation—*vairagya* and opting out of family life—and the reality of joining the monastic community, ponder other reasons that senior leadership asks female aspirants to do this work, and propose a possible solution.

I conclude the thesis by highlighting that an ascetic at any stage is not a “free subject” seeking liberation, as the life of a renunciant is often thought to be, but that an ascetic lives in a highly disciplined world of mutual accountability with other ascetics. In this sense, to be an ascetic is to be part of another kind of community, still



gendered. The PSS exists as a beacon for girls and women to see renunciation as a welcomed life option in the Terapanth; on the other hand, the lack of an institute to train male aspirants may discourage young male Terapanthis from seeking ordination. The point is that being a renouncer is not neutral; asceticism is gendered and oriented much more than we expect to practical concerns of being community leaders, teachers, professors, and proselytizers in addition to pursuing *moksha*. Tracing their lives from the initial thoughts of renunciation to the moment they become ascetics in the Jain Shvetambar Terapanthi order, I show how aspirants who seek to renounce become living embodiments of Jain principles, values and ideals.

## Chapter 1

### **Institutionalized Training: A History of the *Parmarthik Shikshan Sanstha***

“Education comes from within; you get it by struggle and effort and thought.”

- Napoleon Hill (1883-1970)

Human beings want what is best for their lives. Be it career, job, business, education, personal or professional life, unless feeling satisfied that they have chosen the best, they do not move ahead. To find the best options, they explore as best they can.

Parents, wanting to find the best fit for their children’s education, will explore all aspects of a school: who is the management? How well has it been functioning? Will it help to progress my child’s career? Will my child be in safe hands? In their search to provide the best childhood, parents want the best fit for their child. Similar questions arise when parents send their daughters to join the *Parmarthik Shikshan Sanstha* (‘Center for Training on the Religious Life,’ PSS). The PSS was formed on March 11, 1949 (Shantha 1986) as an institute to train the women and girls of the Terapanth sect of Shvetambar Jainism who aspire to renounce the world and lead an ascetic life. It was meant to be the finest method of training ascetics of any renunciant tradition, one to which parents could be confident of sending their children. (This idea not only attracted Terapanthis but others as well.) It would provide a clear picture of what the ascetic life is like before taking the big step of initiation into the mendicant order. What is renunciation all about? How does one lead a disciplined life? Why renunciation? The PSS, founded with the motto, “education before renunciation,” was built as an institution to educate and train aspirants to join the Terapanthi monastic order.

This chapter has two parts. First, I focus on the history and mission of the PSS. Because of the increasing number of female aspirants expressing a desire to join the Terapanthi monastic order, I examine why institutionalized training was so much more successful for female aspirants than males that the mission of the PSS changed to training only women and girls. Second, I discuss the importance ascribed to training female aspirants in this manner, and the challenges faced not only by the aspirants but also by the institution and the congregation. The renunciation narratives of Jain female ascetics allow me to foreground the importance of acquiring practical knowledge as essential to the renunciation journey. I focus on how the road to renunciation is described as hard and strenuous; one goes from home into a life of renunciation filled with many significant changes in clothing, possessions, eating and sleeping habits, and which requires aspirants to engage with others to deal with issues within the renunciant community.

From interviews with current aspirants and former aspirants who are now ascetics, the aspirants who were a part of PSS see practice as crucial to the legitimation of their desire to renounce as Jain women. Despite having direct knowledge from the reading of scriptures and classes, the women did not view the knowledge they obtained from these sources as vital to Jain renunciation. Instead, women found practical training gained from habitual practices and encounters during their training most useful—situations similar to those they will face after initiation. They found tolerance and adjustment most necessary and influential during their training. While these traits are grounded in the official model of Jain renunciation, scholars rarely mention these as key to the development of the ascetic lifestyle.

Instead, these traits are most commonly spoken of as virtues for a new wife to cultivate as she enters her husband's family. It was the practical knowledge they gained while training that proved to be the most influential and impactful. Without such training, it is difficult to grasp the knowledge, skills and abilities that will allow them to lead a successful monastic life.

### **Why the Parmarthik Shikshan Sanstha Became Necessary**

In light of all that female ascetics in the Terapanth do today, we may wonder what role those who were initiated before the inception of this institute played. During Acharya Kalugani's (1876/7-1936) period of leadership, female aspirants were increasing in number. Acharya Kalugani said to his successor, Acharya Tulsi, "Do not initiate aspirants just to build a large number of mendicants; instead [initiate] those who are capable to be so" (Shantha 1986, 2). As female aspirants were growing in number, educating them to give them a sense of what renunciation is and understanding what ascetic life is became increasingly important. It became important to educate female aspirants and give them an experience of renunciate life before they committed to becoming ascetics. Acharya Tulsi's answer to this challenge was to create the PSS.

For all Terapanthi ascetics today, reading the Shvetambar canonical texts is a major part of their daily routine. However, the *sadhvis* initiated prior to the founding of the PSS were not educated, and so had only indirect access to the scriptures from the *sadhus* who supervised them. Close guidance under the monks was not possible because of strict ascetic rules separating the sexes, so they tended to have just the rudiments of the monastic rules they were required to follow as part of their daily

routines. The PSS has thereby played a vital role in revolutionizing the female monastic order, which was part of Acharya Tulsi's progressive vision. Novice monks were educated and trained under the senior monks; hence the need for institutionalized training for male aspirants was not as crucial as it was for female aspirants, who outnumbered male aspirants.

### **A Brief History of the Parmarthik Shikshan Sanstha**

“Those who find delight in freedom from attachment in the renunciation of clinging, free from the inflow of thoughts, they are like shining lights, having reached final liberation in the world.”

- Lord Buddha

The time gap between when an aspirant declares her desire to renounce and the actual time when the aspirant takes initiation into a mendicant order is crucial for her development as an ascetic. Every aspirant should spend this transition period in the most productive manner possible. Jain aspirants who wish to renounce must undergo a training process before being deemed capable and adequately prepared to live the life of an ascetic. This training process varies across sect and *sangha*. While the other sects train their *mumukshus* in an apprenticeship model, having them follow and live like fully ordained monks and nuns, the Terapanth uniquely has this school to train female aspirants. With the intention that an aspirant should be spiritually educated and disciplined, the idea of the PSS came into existence. In India, males have historically been prioritized over females in all things, including education and religious leadership. However, in Jain sects, females have outnumbered males in the ascetic orders. It is a general truth that has long endured in Jain traditions that female ascetics outnumber males. The *Kalpa Sutra* also shows that there were more female

than male renouncers and converts to Jainism in the time of each of the Jinas, suggesting that this has been a longstanding reality of the tradition. This was especially true in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as India struggled for and gained its independence. During this period, female ascetics were given little training in Jain doctrine and canonical scriptures. Acharya Tulsi became the leader of the Terapanth in 1936. In 1949, he made it mandatory that female aspirants should possess basic spiritual and religious knowledge and understand what the ascetic life is before they renounce the world (Shantha 1986; Muni Dulraj 2014). The sheer numbers of female aspirants implied the importance of institutionalized training for females to give them right knowledge about the renunciate life, providing them an idea about what renunciation is at the physical and psychological level (Shantha 1986).

### **From a Mobile to a Fixed PSS**

The PSS was actually founded on March 11, 1949 at Rajaldesar, a small town in Rajasthan, with the blessings of Acharya Tulsi. It took over a decade between his mandate to educate female renouncers and the creation of the PSS. The intake of 28 aspirants, including both male and female aspirants, was considered to prove a prosperous future for the PSS. The institutionalization of renunciate training, in the scope of Jain history, is a fairly recent phenomenon. Historically within the Svetambar tradition, training actually took place after initiation, after one had already become a *sadhvi* or *sadhu*. There was no formal place of training before the PSS was founded; women and men aspiring to renounce went directly from laity to renunciant. They learned how to walk, talk, eat, stand and sit “on the job;” in fact, for most of the

aspirants, reading the Jain scriptures started only after joining the monastic order. Most join the monastic order to become ascetics to achieve moksha, but preparing oneself to live as a Terapanthi mendicant is yet another goal in itself. This was the motive for the creation of the PSS.

Though this institute was formed with great enthusiasm and effort, there was an almost equally great protest against its formation. Surprisingly, protests were not just confined to those from outside the congregation. Protests and questions became intense. Lay Terapanthis, who would be the main financial supporters of this initiative, questioned the need for the institute as well as the relation of education to renunciation. Will there be a new way of renunciation? Is there a flaw in the kind of education we provide to our children? Who shall be the custodian of the aspirants and who will be the guardian of this proposed PSS? Alleging that religion was being modified based merely on the fashion of the time, they wondered about the direction the Terapanth sect was heading. Will the society be accepting of an aspirant who later wishes to lead life as a layperson?<sup>10</sup> Would the PSS be mobile, following the fully ordained mendicants, or fixed in one location? They even insinuated that the PSS was nothing more than a way to assemble lay females around male mendicants outside of family supervision.

Further, they questioned whether having a mobile institute was merely a way to make arrangements for food for the ascetics, a violation of the monastic vows.

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<sup>10</sup> There does exist a social stigma within Indian society against aspirants who initially decided to lead an ascetic life but then decide to step back and lead life as a layperson. The society at large makes it difficult for former aspirants and their families to lead a normal life afterward; the former aspirant is thus stuck between the two worlds.

Further, the challenge was more than this. Even the well-wishers of this organization were bogged down with questions of their own. Moreover, unlike most Jain sects, the Terapanth does not consider any economic charity as a religious act generative of *punya*, meritorious karma. As charity is merely social and has no role to play in religious or spiritual elevation, why would anyone in the Terapanth undertake such a large expense? With such a belief system the economic support needed for such an organization might be challenging (Shantha 1986).

Although the laity were almost totally against the idea of Acharya Tulsi's PSS, there were a few supporters who helped to make his dream a reality. Considering the lack of management or even a place, the PSS was initially started as a mobile institute that would follow the monks and nuns on *vihar* (mendicant wandering). This mobile institute existed between 1949 and 1971 (Shantha 1986, 27). Though there is no clear record on when this institute became permanently and uniquely for females, during the period of the mobile institute male aspirants were a part of it. There were even some male aspirants who were a part of the immobile PSS, but there are no records of the date when it became solely for females. Until then training the *mumukshus* in this mobile institute was similar to an apprenticeship model, having them follow and live like fully ordained monks and nuns, accompanied by a vehicle that served as storage for their belongings. They eventually learned that the aspirants were not able to fulfill the goal of the PSS because of time constraints—with the duties and requirements of the fully ordained monks and nuns, little time was left to train the *mumukshus* in the way Acharya Tulsi envisioned. Further, the *mumukshus'* need for security, accommodation, and basic necessities proved to be a



heavy burden on the laity. The need for a permanent, fixed institute quickly became evident (Shantha 1986).

In 1971, the PSS took on an immobile form, established in Ladnun (Shantha 1986, 28). In 2011, it was moved to its current site on the campus of the Jain Vishva Bharati Institute. It is fully equipped with a cemented and enclosed structure with more than 30 rooms for sleeping and storage, a library, lounge area, kitchen, dining area, courtyard and space for celebratory functions specifically designated for nuns-in-training. Almost all women and girls of the Svetambar Terapanth tradition aspiring to renounce are sent there to train for their new lives as *sadhvis* or *samanis*.

### **Early Challenges of the PSS**

The PSS followed the *gurukul* system, predominant in the Indian education system, designed to make sure that education and spiritual training were provided as well as overall development to nurture good conduct.<sup>11</sup> The PSS was designed to be an innovative way to reach Jain females considering renunciation, providing a more complete understanding of the doctrines and practices. Jain female renunciants needed to construct themselves as legitimate practitioners as they aimed for the goal of *moksha* while also training to become future educators themselves. Jain female aspirants must express at all stages of renunciation a high level of comprehension, acceptance and promotion of the Jain renunciant ideal.

Though the PSS had become an immobile institute, there had been no proper routine established at its inception. The specific rules and regulations for the aspirants

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<sup>11</sup> A *gurukul* is a type of residential school in India with pupils living near the guru, often in the same house. Before British rule, they served as South Asia's primary educational institution. Here, guru does not necessarily mean *acharya*, the head of a monastic order.

to follow once they joined this institution were not yet set. Though the women were motivated to join this institute by the aspiration to renounce the world, they lacked a clear understanding of the mindset and behavior required of an ascetic. Some were very simple and humble, but others were outspoken. Some had very deep aspirations but others had wavering minds about renunciation. Some were very thoughtful and considerate while others did not know how to live in a group (Shantha 1986). Apart from all these differences, there was no formalized or uniform pattern of dress code: some wore colored robes, some wore white robes, some veiled their face, and some did not. Some wore Indian traditional robes (long skirt along with blouse and long dupatta), including jewelry, and some wore saris. There was no strict implementation of the rules.

Though the institution was formed to follow strict rules, initially it lacked the ability to fulfill these conditions. The spark that drove the aspirants to the PSS, which was supposed to be visible when one sees these aspirants, was not visible in their dress code. They had a disorganized routine of eating habits; they ate what they liked instead of what was served; some even carried some palatable food with them (Shantha 1986). Aspirants did not have a strict schedule for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Schedules for sleeping and waking were not uniform. The aspirants were guided by different ascetics, hence the instruction was also not uniform. Each group emphasized different practices: some focused on being knowledgeable about doctrines, others on memorizing and reciting scriptures, still others on being fluent speakers or being great at Sanskrit and Prakrit.

## **Formalizing the PSS Rules and Regulations**

As the PSS was a new phenomenon, the rules were formalized as it grew. Stricter rules were implemented and education was standardized over time as the needs and motives of those joining the institute became more apparent to the leadership. These implementations improved and regulated the training within the PSS and were well received in the society. Since its inception, the rules have changed and may change still further based on the need to build an ever better ascetic training facility.

Every aspect of the *mumukshu*'s life was given a good pattern to follow; rules were made stricter so that they knew how to live the disciplined life the *sadhvis* they were training to become do. From dawn to dusk, every act was regulated; the concept of mindfulness was made more intense so that they lived the ascetic life more profoundly. A dress code was established. The dress color of all aspirants irrespective of the hierarchy should be white.<sup>12</sup> The dress of a *mumukshu* now included a blouse, a skirt and a sari with a thin line of light colored embroidery. The dress of the *upasika* is similar to a *salwar kameez*: a pajama and a high-collared *kurta* with a neatly folded and pinned *dupatta*.

## **Illustrating Celibacy: The Story of Mumukshu Kiran**

The episode of Mumukshu Kiran in the PSS was frightening and challenging for the aspirant, the organization and the congregation. A spirit who supposedly was connected to her from a previous birth tormented Mumukshu Kira and was on the verge of revenge, becoming a barrier to her development on the spiritual path.

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<sup>12</sup> The dress code of the *upasika* is a recent change. Until 2010 every aspirant joining this institute wore a sari as their uniform. The importance of having white colored uniform for an aspirant was decided by the laity. It was made a mandatory rule on consultation with the Acharya.

Initially there was skepticism about the whole affair from the other aspirants, but among all the *mumukshus* only she and her robes were being disturbed. As her condition persisted, however, it terrified the other aspirants. Surprisingly, the spirit could not torture her when she fasted, but on the days she broke her fast, the spirit could disturb her to a great extent. She dedicated herself to ever longer fasts, but eventually she had to eat and those days were troublesome (Shantha 1992).

Mumukshu Kiran's journey was not an easy one. On further analysis of her day-to-day routine, and with the help of the Acharya and nuns, they figured out that this spirit would not spare her until she either died or allowed him to touch her body. One of the main vows of a *mumukshu* is to live a life of celibacy; Kiran was ready to sacrifice her life rather than fulfill the wish of the spirit to touch her. The tormenting behavior of the spirit was increasing; medical treatment had no impact on her, and in fact doctors could not treat her as they were not able to understand what she was suffering from. She was normal while fasting, so she decided to fast indefinitely. As she had aspired to become a *sadhvi*, Acharya Tulsi initiated her as an ascetic; soon after she decided to lead a peaceful death and took the vow of *santhara* (Shantha 1992, 3-67).<sup>13</sup>

On reading Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process*, I found the concept of polarization of meaning useful to understand the significance of Kiran's story. A symbol can be analyzed from physiological, social and moral perspectives (Turner 1969). The story presents a struggle between good and evil forces. We see that the

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<sup>13</sup> *Santhara*: Fasting unto death. According to Jainism, a means to rid oneself of all karma particles and to achieve liberation.

spirit was not able to execute its power when Kiran was fasting. The spirit was not able to fulfill his desire. Yet Mumuskhu Kiran had to go to the extreme of *santhara* to finally live up to her spiritual goal and remain celibate.

We also see that the battle did not remain merely with Kiran; it became a struggle of the congregation against the spirit. Congregational efforts were done to resolve her situation. Kiran's journey also reflects that the journey of the aspirant at some point is not an individual journey but a collective journey of the congregation. Though the aspirant is detached from the family, the family was greatly supportive and available to the aspirant. Furthermore, the Jain philosophy of rebirth and karma becomes more explicit here. How long will it take for the spirit to finish with the malice he carried for her? Did it continue into her next birth? Mumuskhu Kiran has become an unforgettable story for the *mumukshus* of the PSS. The courage depicted by the female renouncer was not only applauded then but is still seen as a model for the aspirants. This gives them a stark picture: that in an ascetic's life, challenges definitely arise, but it is how well one stands up to that challenge and succeeds that makes one a real hero. Mumuskhu Kiran is the best example to depict how this institute nurtures an aspirant to face her challenges and prove that she has become a real ascetic. The way she performed her adherence to the ascetic vows stands as a symbol of the extent to which *mumukshus* are expected to face the challenges they will encounter as ascetics from the first day they enter the PSS.

## **Routine of Aspirants at PSS**

*Mumukshus* start their day at 4:00 a.m. From 4:30 until 7:30 a.m. all female aspirants recite *Arhat Vandana* and the *Bhaktamar Stotra* as a part of their *samayik*.<sup>14</sup> After this they perform *Guru Vandana* (Homage to Guru),<sup>15</sup> meditation and some yogic exercises. They change out of their nighttime dress to daytime dress,<sup>16</sup> then proceed by foot to the monks' residence for *darshan* and then walk back to the institute for breakfast. Breakfast is 7:30-8:00 a.m.<sup>17</sup> Schedules differ post breakfast amongst aspirants, as some attend school, some have individual classes with *samanis*, and some have to go to the University for Classes to earn credit for a degree, Bachelors, Masters or Doctorate. From 11:30 to 12:00 p.m. all aspirants have their lunch except for child aspirants. The child aspirants who go to school carry their lunch along with them and have lunch according to the time prescribed by the school. From noon until 4:30 p.m. there is the same routine as the 8:00-11:30 a.m. schedule. Dinner time is from 4:30-5:00 p.m. After dinner and until 6:00 p.m. time is given for individual spiritual learning. At 6:00 p.m. all aspirants visit *sadhvis* for *darshan*. They perform *Guru Vandana* there and return back to the PSS. *Arhat Vandana* is again recited in

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<sup>14</sup> The literal meaning is blessed path of emancipation. *Samayik* is one of the most important ritual practice of Jainism during which we try to come closer to our soul. During *samayik*, one must sit down in one place for forty-eight minutes isolating self from daily household, social, business, or school activities. This time is spent to read religious books, pray, worship, recite rosary, or do meditation.

<sup>15</sup> To pay homage with devotion is known as *vandana*. When expressed towards the *guru*, who is the head of the congregation, it is known as *Guru Vandana*. Its literal meaning is "Reverence for the Teacher." *Guru Vandana* is a spiritual offering of connecting inner self, directly or indirectly to the Guru.

<sup>16</sup> Every aspirant has to wear a night dress (the same uniform which is in day) but a dress allocated specially for night wear. They cannot wear the night wear dress in the day.

<sup>17</sup> Every aspirant as a part of training at PSS should have a count of not more than 21 food items in a day no food should include root vegetables.

the evening from 8:00 to 8:30 p.m. From then until 10:00 p.m. there is time for individual spiritual learning. 10:00 p.m. is bedtime.

Aspirants learn how to walk and sit properly, adhering to the *mahavrata* (great vow) of *ahimsa*, taking note of how to walk outside of their residence. They also learn how to properly eat their food so as not to spill anything on their saris. This is important as they are only allowed seven saris for the year and constant staining of saris from food would increase their chance of using up their sari allowance. In doing so, they learn how to make do with limited amounts of clothing, thus practicing increasing adherence to *aparigraha*. *Mumukshus'* training thus includes theoretical knowledge in the form of *swadhyaya* (study) and classes, and practical knowledge through the practices outlined above. When asked what was essential in training for renunciation, the women largely responded that it was the knowledge gained from practice.

The rules were formed and changed to meet practical needs; making the pedagogy more formalized was not always the motivating factor in changes. There were many rules that were implemented that proved unproductive or unnecessary for the ascetic life and so were changed or dropped. As one *sadhvi* said,

We as aspirants are responsible for taking care of food, so in that the group in charge for the day will serve all the aspirants and then have it [for themselves] last. So every group is assigned when they shall lead the dining room. We as aspirants decided to cook new and varied dishes on our respective dates allotted. It was good for a few days, but after some days the institute realized that this was not only building possession over food but it was consuming most of our time and energy in deciding what to cook. Thus, it was made mandatory to eat what was prepared by the cooks of the institute and [we would] merely serve [the others] when the kitchen duty was allotted. (Sadhvi Khyatashaji, 2015).

Recently a computer lab was added to the PSS. It was given a space within the institute just to take any online exams or to address issues of emergencies. The lab remains closed most of the time and the key to the room is kept with the head of the aspirants. There is even an attendance notebook within the room and it is mandatory for all the system users to make sure they write down the time they got in, the time they leave, and their purpose for using the computers. Thus, admission to the lab was allowed only for the purpose for which it was built. This is one example of how new rules were developed when new additions were made to the PSS that played a questionable role in the development of the ascetic life. We can see in this case that rules and regulations are formalized based on need; the PSS is making sure that such items do not become seen as necessities, which might lead to a sense of possession.

Training practices of Terapanthi women heavily emphasize practical knowledge. For example, the study of scriptures is not an integral part of their training; rather, it is seen as the primary goal of their preparation. That is, as *mumukshus*, they learn to read Sanskrit and Prakrit so that they may study the scriptures once they are ordained. In this way, we see that the mission of the PSS has to do with preparing women to receive the proper knowledge by instilling the information, training and skills needed for them to live a successful life as a *sadhvi* or *samani*.

### ***Mumukshu – A Seeker with a Desire for Liberation***

Once any Jain aspirant, female or male, takes the first step towards renunciation through the cultivation of *vairagya*, she or he now has the proper tools to attain the second gem of Jain doctrine, namely *samyak jnana* (right knowledge). It is something



one strives to cultivate that is only complete upon achieving *kevala jnana* (omniscience) and correct instruction on how to lead a life that falls in line with the ultimate Jain principles of *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacarya* (celibacy) and *aparigraha* (non-possession). While *ahimsa* might be the governing principle for Jainism, *aparigraha* is the basic principle guiding why we even have a culture of renunciation at all in South Asian religions. The only way to salvation is to abandon attachment to possessions. Any one of the five “Great Vows” (*mahavrata*s) can be taken as supreme, with the other four supporting that one. Jains tend to favor *ahimsa* as the supreme vow, but each vow is capable of being seen as the supreme one (K. Jain 2011, 397). Keeping this concept in mind, *mumukshus*’ performance of *aparigraha* as a step towards the proper performance of *samyak jnana* remains a crucial factor to creating themselves as Jain renunciators.

Training the aspirants was and is a very big challenge for the institute and the congregation. As part of their training, *mumukshus* emulate a quasi-mendicant lifestyle. The secluded social environment, strict and highly disciplined rules and regulations, hierarchy of aspirants and teachers, and educational requirements, all serve as an all-encompassing method of training. When I asked the Sadhvi Pramukha, head of the female ascetics, what they expect from an aspirant when they join the institute, her answer came crisp and clear, “An aspirant should have dedication towards the congregation, towards the Acharya, towards education and gaining new knowledge. The thirst for learning should never die. Different aspirants come from different environments, the idea of molding or to be flexible to any situation and still live like a sadhvi.” Adjustability is a trait that can only be learned through practice.

One can open a dictionary and read what the definition of adjustment is, but one cannot learn to embody adjustment through reading. It has to be performed; it has to be practiced daily in order for it to become ingrained in a renunciant. A person only learns about modification and its importance on the renunciant path by experiencing the various situations in which one has no choice but to adjust and change one's perspective. Unlike laity, ascetics are to have no idea where they will sleep each night, what they will eat, or what the facilities will include or not include, all taken for granted by most of us. Adjusting and living happily with what is being offered is what an ascetic is expected to do. Along with adjustment, many of the women emphasized a trait that may be even more vital to one's survival as a Jain renunciant: tolerance, which can only be developed during training at PSS.

When I asked another senior nun, the Sadhvi Mukhyaniyojika,<sup>18</sup> the same question, she replied, "Apart from *vairagya*, a *mumukshu* should have a clear knowledge about *Tattva jnana* (Metaphysics). As the entire philosophy of Jainism revolves around it, it would be easy for the aspirant as well as the congregation." In this sense, we get the view that what it means to be an ascetic is not merely to progress spiritually and educationally on a personal level, but to discipline oneself into a monastic order that necessarily includes training oneself to be an educator, accepting their responsibility toward others in the mendicant hierarchy as a necessary part of their training. No aspirant is alone, as no ascetic is alone, but is always located in a community with whom they will remain in contact throughout their lives. The

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<sup>18</sup> This is the title given to the nun who holds the second highest rank in the hierarchy of female ascetics.

biggest adjustment to the expectations with which most *mumukshus* arrive at the PSS is that an ascetic at any stage is not a “free subject” seeking liberation, as the desire to renounce is often thought to be; rather an ascetic lives in a highly disciplined world of mutual accountability and discipline with other ascetics who have the job of educating and guiding the Terapanth congregation. In this sense, to be an ascetic is to be part of another kind of community.

When I asked aspirants what they expect from the institution, one *mumukshu* said,

Aspiring and living are two different things. The PSS has been very productive in guiding us to know what ascetic life is. After wishing to renounce and getting trained, one gets to know how possessed one is with oneself. Being non-possessive to the extent of letting all old possessions go away and living a completely non-possessive life [includes] letting go of one’s name. For an aspirant, the challenge begins when one aspires, right from getting permission granted until [entering] the life [of] an ascetic; challenges are born every day (Mumukshu Pooja, 2015).

Here, we see that aspirants expect that the institute provides a clear impression that, beyond the mere feeling of *vairagya* that inspired their aspirations, to become an ascetic they must be ready to face the deep existential challenges that the ascetic life forces them to confront. Few *mumukshus* expressed an expectation of being trained in the finer points of Jain doctrine or to become the scholars, educators and leaders of the Jain community that *samanis* and *sadhvis* actually are.

### **Curriculum and Tensions of *Mumukshu* at PSS**

Every *mumukshu* not only undertakes the journey of self-growth academically and spiritually, but also serves the organization. Each one is assigned the duty of every department including medical, storehouse, library, kitchen, and custodial. This

delegation of work even helps aspirants learn management and leadership skills. This work, though seeming merely to manage the organization and assist within the community, enriches the natural capabilities of the aspirant, and serves the purpose of identity and belonging. Though the journey seemed to have opened doors for detachment, most *mumukshus* felt a sense of “mineness” with the organization. Though this is not intentional, being a part of PSS, aspirants get attached to it. Terming the institute “*MAA*,” meaning mother in most Indian languages, aspirants build a relationship as a daughter to a mother.

Conversely, with the requirement placed on each aspirant to train the junior aspirants, the leaders and management of the PSS must also address and manage the individual needs and requirements of individual aspirants. They do this by managing the aspirants’ understanding of what it means to be an ascetic. When a *mumukshu* acts in an inappropriate or disruptive manner to her peers, they are directed and guided on the importance of being a *mumukshu* and how an ascetic should act if this situation arises in the future. They may even be threatened with expulsion if inappropriate behavior is repeated often. Joining this institute is not a guarantee that one will join the monastic order. If during the training the aspirant or the institute feels that the aspirant cannot proceed to a life as an ascetic, they may be sent back home. It seems as though there is a great difference between the way that the Terapanth is imagining why one becomes an ascetic, focusing on *vairagya* and a thirst for *moksha*, and the everyday practicalities of being part of a religious community, in which one teaches, counsels, and is disciplined by others. These are always in tension with one another and show us that to be an ascetic is to be part of a community while also being an

individual in pursuit of *moksha*. But if an aspirant is not able to abide by the rules and regulations or is not able to lead a disciplined life, it is better to expel a *mumukshu* than to defrock a *samani* or *sadhvi*, as it would cause less tension within the congregation.

The performance of the second gem of Jainism, right knowledge, further demonstrates that if a woman takes the first step towards renunciation on one end of the spectrum, it does not determine that the rest of her journey will develop at the same pace. Instead, Jain female aspirants' journeys are dynamic, jumping from one end of the spectrum to the other and dabbling in between from time to time. This is similar to any life here: say when you start a new job, your colleagues and your manager would help you for the first few days so that you get familiar with things, after which it is on your ability to do your job right. Similarly, in the ascetic life, nuns and monks would guide you until you get into the swing of things, but it is your journey to achieve salvation and hence it is upon the salvation seeker to achieve it while facing the challenges you encounter in your acetic life. As Samani Bhaskar Prajna (2015) said,

Lord Mahavir has definitely prescribed in detail how an ascetic should live. None can deny but it was this institute which nurtures us [in regard to] what to do when, how, where, [and] under whose guidance... The [PSS teaches us] to think from the point of view of an ascetic and not that of a layperson. Every rule formed by the institute is in a way linked to give an idea that even this can happen in ascetic life. Every year as aspirants we are sent to those places where ascetics cannot spread sermons, and we play the role at that time as aspirants. We definitely recite *agam* (scriptures) and the voice of the Lord on those eight auspicious days, but it is the institute that guides us how to do that, because learning and teaching are two different things. Moreover, it's true we can guide and advise the laity to resolve their family issues, but many a times layperson wants us to enter into their family issues. Once again falling under the web of worldly affairs is

not what an ascetic does. We advise them to follow non-violence and stop possessions, which would solve all problems.

This kind of practical training helps the aspirants know and learn the challenges in spreading sermons and taking pastoral care of the lay community. By performing the act of spreading sermons, aspirants try to learn from these experiences what they are still lacking and what it is that they should still learn in order to lead a successful life as an ascetic.

Mumukshu Ronak: We have learnt in Jain scriptures to forgive and do *Micchami Dukkadam*.<sup>19</sup> But in practicality it gets real difficult to follow this. To forgive someone is not easy. This teaching is given to every Jain, but who really does with true heart, there lies a small step of the real dedication to achieve *moksha*. We, as aspirants, every day before going to sleep have to convey ‘*Michammi Dukkadam*’ to every aspirant. This in a way is a very effective training given by PSS, which can be experienced only practically. This gives a good understanding about how to avoid conflicts with your group mates and is a step to *nirjara* (Mumukshu Ronak, 2015).<sup>20</sup>

Through practices and experiences gained from their preparation to be nuns, Jain women cultivate the first two gems of Jainism, right faith and right knowledge. The attainment of *samyak darshana* and *samyak jnana* allows female aspirants to receive the crown jewel of Jain gems, right conduct (*samyak caritra*), through the performance of renunciation. They are now ready to take the official and formal step into renunciation—*diksha*.

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<sup>19</sup> Asking for forgiveness and granting forgiveness to any words, actions, speech or thought that has hurt the other person. They perform this by joining both the hands and bowing down their head to ask for and grant forgiveness.

<sup>20</sup> The word *nirjara* is made up of “*nir*” and “*jara*.” *Nir* is a prefix, while *jara* means “to fall off.” Hence, in the Jain philosophy *nirjara* means the falling off, destruction, or removal of karmas from the soul. *Nirjara* is accomplished by undergoing physical and spiritual austerities, including fasting, mortification of the body, confession and penance, reverence for superiors, service to others, meditation and study, and indifference to the body and its needs.

## Conclusion

Geertz saw the “deep play” of the Balinese cockfight as a way of understanding a society: its tensions, rivalries, alternative forms of communication, etc. The cultural and social happenings of Balinese society are highlighted in the cockfight. The way of interpreting the cockfight, seeing it not merely as a fight but as the way of understanding the larger social and cultural dimensions, is what I understand by his phrase, “saying something of something” (Geertz 1973: 448). The purpose of this chapter was to explore *mumukshus*’ contribution to the Terapanthi congregation. The rigorous training provided by the PSS has nurtured the aspirants in a deep way and this had indeed made them dedicate themselves to the congregation and helped them toward realizing the self. Though this institute and the *mumukshus* have faced lots of challenges in their respective journeys, they could flourish and could make a mark within society. The motto of the institute, “education before renunciation,” turned the cards and with time changes that favored the needs of the aspirants’ spiritual journeys were implemented. But still a few unanswered questions remain: if the dress of ascetics is something very different from the sari, and wearing a sari did not help the ascetic life of the *sadhvis*, then why was this chosen for the *mumukshus*? Does building a motherly relationship with the institute lead to the accumulation of *mohaniya* (deluding) karmas and sense of possessiveness (*parigraha*)?

Combining renunciation and education was a real positive step for women religious aspirants in the Terapanth. The journey from the mere idea to the formation of the institute and its survival until today—producing a growing number of well-trained female ascetics which prove to be great assets to the congregation—was not

simple or easy. This shows that though the motto of the institute is “education before renunciation,” the narratives of the Jain female aspirants demonstrate that the institute is a test for an aspirant to clearly show how capable she is to fit into the monastic order. The challenges they faced and still face have been immense and in this way show the dedication of the entire congregation to make a dream come true. Its true ascetics and laity must have a good understanding of each other to lead a good and peaceful life.

The inception of the PSS is a good example to show that, with the blessings of Acharya and the support of the laity, this dream of producing educated female ascetics in the congregation could be successful. The PSS helps the aspirants to understand the three gems and the importance of the five great vows, which works in a chain of understanding, nurturing the aspirant by giving them a platform to practice being disciplined *sadhvis*. Thus, it is important to know the significance of the PSS both in the life of an aspirant and for the survival and growth of the Terapanth. Though most of the scriptural studies are still done after joining the monastic order, the prerequisites of how to live a disciplined and successful monastic life are met through the practical training of the PSS, which proves to be a boon to this generation.



## Chapter 2

### Understanding Karma and Renunciation as an Aspirant

The Jain doctrine of karma is based on the idea that one's previous and current deeds lead to what one experiences at present and in the future. Karmic bondage is not only based on actions but also on thought, speech and intention, thus describing the importance of ascetic discipline to free one's soul from the bondage of karma. This chapter provides an interpretation of karma with special attention to the details of its metaphysical underpinnings, then explores the role of karma in aspirants' lives and considers how well aspirants understand karma before and during their training, and how they relate their understanding of karma to their own spiritual quests.

What importance do *mumukshus* give to understanding the complex, intricate karma theory? I will analyze aspirants' emerging performances of particular religious symbols and concepts as expressed through practice, present in the rite of initiation (*diksha*) and other rituals and practices that lead up to it. These, I argue, are performative discourses that make it possible for them to renounce as well as keep them from renouncing. Jain female renunciators draw upon these symbolic and ritualized actions to create and legitimate their constructions of Jain female renunciation in a patriarchal Indian society. Why do they choose to renounce and what decisions are related to this step? How do *mumukshus* view renunciation, Jainism, and the principles they use to make the life decision to become a *sadhvi*? How do they negotiate the differences between the rhetoric of renunciation, which tends to couch seeking liberation as an individual endeavor, and the practicalities of the day-to-day life of a *mumukshu*, in which their training reinforces mutual

interdependence? I highlight moments of tension among the aspirants that demonstrate how their feelings of *viaragya* (dispassion for the worldly things leading to the desire for renunciation) that inspire them to become *mumukshus* conflict with the daily life at the PSS, where one is part of another kind of family, expected to raise one's juniors. I examine how they try to resolve this tension, specifically how they deploy karma theory to this situation, to accept the challenge as a part and parcel of ascetic life. Thus, I highlight how the *mumukshus* I interviewed understood the role karma—especially *mohaniya* (deluding) karma and *antraya* (obstacle-bearing) karma—plays in their lives and the importance of shedding karma to achieve *moksha*.

In my interviews, I asked about the aspirants' lives prior to renunciation. Much of the data collected concerning initiation ceremonies and the experiences of the Jain nuns after initiation as *sadhvis* and *samanis* were in the form of field notes and participation observation. From observed rituals and practices, I then analyzed the performative aspects of Jain female renunciation. I recorded information concerning renunciation practices from the discussions. This chapter will demonstrate how symbolic structures inherent in practice, namely strong will, right faith and *punya* emerge in the performance of Jain renunciation, and how those characteristics contribute to consolidating a religious identity that enables aspirants to feel they are ready to renounce the world.

### **Jain Karma Theory and Renunciation**

The centrality of *ahimsa* to Jain daily life can also be seen in the discourse surrounding Jain karma theory. In spite of the fact that the normal interpretation of *ahimsa* is just “non-harm” or “non-violence,” there exists a more profound

importance to it. According to Jeffery Long (2009), *ahimsa* is the absence of even a desire to do harm to any living being, in thought, word, or deed. As its inverse, *himsa* (violence) draws in interests that prompt the most noticeably awful of karmas—negative activities, contemplations and discourses that cause the greatest agony—subsequently prompting the accumulation of *pap* (bad) karmas. The accumulation of any karma, both *punya* (good karma) and *pap* (bad karma), is ultimately undesirable in Jainism as the definite objective of all life is *moksha* (liberation) through the shedding of all karmas. Good karmas, however, can help facilitate one’s growth on the spiritual path, while *pap* sinks one further into *samsara*.

The aim of Jain practice is to stop the influx of all karma (both positive and negative) and shed all collected karma through penance and practice to free itself from the constant cycle of rebirth and reach the highest point of the Jain universe. Jains believe accumulated and inflowing karma is extremely difficult to determine with any accuracy, primarily because of the number of factors influencing its influx.<sup>21</sup>

According to Umaswati’s *Tattvartha Sutra* (6.7), the most widely accepted treatise on Jain doctrine, three main aspects characterize an action’s consequent karmic influx—the intention, intensity, and duration of an action. Depending on whether there is an intention behind an action and whether that intention is good or bad, different types of karma will be attracted to a *jiva* (soul), with different strength, and to different amounts depending on one’s intentions. Similarly, the types and amount of karmas will be different depending on the intensity with which an action is

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<sup>21</sup> It is hard to say which karma are becoming attached to a soul at any point in time as a result of any action, as Jains have such a complex typology of eight kinds of karma.

performed. The duration of an action only influences the amount of karma accumulated, it does not affect the type and intensity of the karmic bondage. It should be emphasized that karma can only be bound as long as the cause of its bondage is in existence—as soon as the cause disappears, the bonding of karma ceases (Glasenapp 1991, 63). In terms of intensity and intention, Sadhvi Siddharthprabha (2015) told me,

Acharya Mahashraman always says that it's not necessary that one should renounce in this birth itself. But at least [one] should aspire that, 'In some birth I should renounce.' This intension and the intensity with which one aspires to builds good karmas, which becomes a reason to renounce in this or future birth.

This illustrates to us that the amount of time one spends thinking about renunciation, and the intensity with which one thinks about it, will have a positive impact in the future. In this sense, an intention *is* an action (karma).

Apart from karma theory, the idea of non-possession (*aparigraha*) is one of the most important criteria to understand about renunciation. This idea of non-possession is established against popular values that promote prominent material possession. Jainism is uniquely known even today for the renunciation practices being followed; a renouncer abandons the world to live a life as prescribed in the scriptures. The strange position of Jain renouncer becomes apparent because of the radical way of renunciation, which requires relinquishing everything, including one's connection to society, to the world and one's past social personality, surrendering everything that once characterized who that individual was and what once made up their personality (Ganguly and DeVotta 2010).

## Why Renunciation?

Family plays a very crucial role in the lives of Indian girls and women; in this respect, Jains are no special case. Jain groups all through India urge females to carry on with the life of a *shravika*, a householder, which includes getting married and having children. Despite the respect paid to actual *sadhvis* and the abstract desire to renounce, girls and young unmarried women are often strongly discouraged from actually pursuing renunciation. Subsequently, another term used to portray Jain women is *pativrata*. Once a female accepts the teachings of Jainism, she is a *shravika*; once she is married, she takes a vow (*vrata*) to be committed to her spouse (*pati*), hence a *pativrata* (Keltting 2009).<sup>22</sup>

The discourses of *shravika* and *pativrata* permit Jain women only to listen to the Jain teachings and serve their spouses.<sup>23</sup> Several aspirants cited this as the reason they wanted to pursue renunciation; they would not like to wed and lead an existence as an ordinary *shravika* and *pativrata*, which, in their estimation, does not the slightest bit prompt freedom but rather simply binds terrible karmas. One can wipe out all karma through the uprooting of the two noteworthy seeds, attachment and anger, which requires major amounts of *sadhana* (spiritual practice) and detachment from all things, both living and material. Non-possession incorporates everything from their property and social status to their name.

During my fieldwork, my first question to all of my interviewees was why they chose to renounce the world. How can one make this decision? It definitely is

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<sup>22</sup> *Vrat* is the same word as we find in the *Mahavrats*.

<sup>23</sup> The literal meaning is listener.

neither an easy path nor is it dreamt of as often as becoming a rock star, doctor, engineer, an MBA, actor, professional or so on. Who and what motivates them? Answers varied from one aspirant to another, but the most common answers aspirants gave were that they decided to renounce because they felt marriage was not their destiny, they wanted to do something different, they got the spark based on the *punya* (meritorious karma) of previous years (or lifetimes), or that they had someone within the congregation who acted as a motivation to them.

Sadhvi Pramukha Kanakprabha (2015) said,

I wished to renounce but due to fear I could not reveal my aspiration to my family; and by then I was about to get engaged and it was before my engagement my uncle expired. Hence then after his death I made courage and told them my aspiration and stood strong in it, as initially my family was not ready to let me take this decision.<sup>24</sup>

She was moved by the death of her uncle and realized that this birth has to be worthwhile, and should be spent in a better way than marrying. Listening to Sadhvi Pramukha and others, it becomes evident to me that the dominant Jain discourse concerning *vairagya* and detachment are essential to *mumukshus*' construction and views of the catalysts for their renunciation. Death is a common reason why women took stock of their karma accumulation and decided to renounce. Like the decision Sadhvi Pramukha made, they began to realize that by simply having the thoughts of initiation, sparked by the death of a loved one, that their current life was a very auspicious one—a life that they should take advantage of. The narratives of women

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<sup>24</sup> *Sadhvi Pramukha* is the title given to the head of the nuns. Nuns of this sect who have any concerns should address her before heading to Acharya. She is the eight *sadhvi Pramukha* in the Terapanth sect.

like Sadhvi Pramukha Kanakprabha and others testify to the necessity for all Jains to utilize one's human life to renounce and pursue *moksha*.<sup>25</sup>

### **Aspiring to Achieve *Moksha* – *Ekbhavatari***

Jain karma theory plays a significant role in the women's associations of *shravika*-hood with *pap* (demeritorious karma). According to Jain karma theory, rebirth into human form is not only very auspicious but also rare in the continuum of rebirths (Jacobi 1895, 15-18). It is held that before coming to this state of human birth, a spirit experiences upwards of 8.4 million births in lower lifeforms, for example, as *nigodas* (cluster of minute beings) (Bronkhorst 2011).<sup>26</sup> When, at long last, getting a human rebirth, one ought to exploit it as the boon it is, a rare chance to attain *moksha*.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, renunciation is not based on caste, creed or color. It is based on one's aspiration and ability to follow the strict austerities laid down by any congregation for their ascetics to follow. Rules and regulations for an ascetic or aspirant exist without regard to the comfort of the aspirants and do not change from one individual to another because they were laid down when the congregation was formed; any changes that may occur would be the result of the needs of a particular time. I interviewed Mumukshu Khushboo, about her reasons for becoming a *mumukshu*. She was a complete novice to the Terapanth and to this institutionalized

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<sup>25</sup> Though *moksha* is officially not possible in this birth, all renouncers renounce the world with the idea to get a better next birth, from which they can attain *moksha* directly.

<sup>26</sup> According to P.S. Jaini (2000, 127) the *nigoda* is a realm existing in which the lowest forms of life reside in endless numbers, and without any hope of release by self-effort. Jain scriptures describe *nigodas* which are sub-microscopic creatures living in large clusters and having a very short life and are said to pervade each and every part of universe, even in tissues of plants and flesh of animals.

<sup>27</sup> Jains believe that only in human birth can one attain *moksha*.

training system when she decided to become a *mumukshu*, as she comes from a Gujarati background and not from a Terapanthi family.

Komal: What made you choose the path of renunciation?

*Mumukshu Khushboo*: To attain liberation.<sup>28</sup>

Komal: None can attain *moksha* in this time period; then why this path?

*Mumukshu Khushboo*: That attainment of *moksha* is not possible in this birth is a much known fact to all, but striving to attain *moksha* directly from the next birth is my goal and for this I need to practice *tapas* (penance) from this birth. I want to become *ekabhavatari*<sup>29</sup> and I am blessed to be a part of this Terapanth *sampraday* (tradition), getting acceptance from Gurudev to follow the path (*Mumukshu Khushboo*, 2015).<sup>30</sup>

To attain *ekabhavatari*, one has to become totally detached from all possession and get rid of almost all karmas. Khushboo highlights that she wants to get rid of the cycle of birth and death. Valley (2002) clarifies that it is through dedication to their guru and his teachings that Jain *sadhvis* and aspirants examine and narrate their lives as renunciants. However, their education and logical, detached manner of speaking also serves to mark them as renunciants performatively, indicating a different inner disposition. Valley's work does emphasize the affective connection with the guru as key to their self-construction. My work builds on hers by attending to the significance of certain symbolic structures of renunciation, including gender ideologies, in the ways Jain females perform their own renunciations. As we see from the above narration and others, we see the devotion towards the guru by the aspirants and the

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<sup>28</sup> *Moksh ki prapti ke liye.*

<sup>29</sup> One who attains *moksha* from the next birth.

<sup>30</sup> *Gurudev* refers to Acharya Mahashraman.



mendicants is a symbolic representation of understanding how renunciation is understood from a renunciant point of view. Mumukshu Khusboo portrays devotion as a blessing that would lead her to understand the right path and the three gems of Jainism.

### **Understanding Karma through Practice**

Sadhvi Kalpalatha also touches on a particular aspect of Jain discourse distinguishing it from other South Asian religions, the idea of karma accumulation through more than a person's actions. For Jains, in order to completely stop the accrual of *pap* karmas, simply not committing violent or harmful acts is not enough. Although it is beneficial on a small scale, the only way to fully stop *pap* karmas from sticking to one's subtle body is through controlling a person's actions, speech and thoughts. This is crucial to the lives of Jain renunciants. Jain laity and renunciants widely accept the hegemonic idea of physical non-violence. It is obvious to all Jains that people should not hit other people. It is obvious that people should not physically hurt other living beings. It is not obvious that people should not think about physically or psychologically harming another living being. This is crucial to the anomalous position of Jain nuns, as they must live with other Jain nuns – women whom they have never met, with differing personalities, behaviors and mannerisms – for the rest of their lives. Touching on this unique aspect, Sadhvi Kalpalathaji introduces practicing non-violence through a person's thoughts as vital when she introduces not hurting anyone while in a group. As *mumukshus* are not allowed to travel or live alone, learning how to co-habitate with other group members is fundamental.

It was difficult for me to realize and accept the fact these female renouncers have decided to choose this path in this generation where most laypeople do things automatically with a click of a button; they still want to abide by the orthodox way of living to stop all passions. It was especially challenging for me to interview aspirants who were my juniors in my undergraduate college, with whom I am still good friends. It was surprising to see these two cousins who lived together since childhood in a joint family, in this new life. When I asked them why and what made them choose this path, Mumukshu Preksha (2015) replied:

Mumukshu Preksha: I had compared my future life with my sister's. I had to make a decision on which life is a wise life. On listening and seeing my sister's 'worldly life' and then thinking about spiritual life, I decided to choose the ascetic life to be best suitable for my life.

Komal: Did you compare your life with your parents'? You have seen your parents' life inside and out. And they have seen life more than your siblings. Aren't your parents happy with their life or are you not happy with their life? I am asking this because you said you compared it with your sibling's life.

Mumukshu Preksha: I have seen my parents' life and my sibling's life as well. I had to make a choice between the worldly life and spiritual life. My sister and I (both cousins joined PSS on the same day) have good knowledge about the metaphysics. Having known that, [we] had an idea about the soul, birth, cycle, karma and its impact. Then [we] realized that utilization of this human birth is most important. I and my cousin did not want to waste our life [sic] by leading [it] as a normal wife, or play a motherly role, which at the end of the day does nothing for self but for the family. I do not claim that this life is an easy life, challenges do exist in this life too, but at least we are doing something for our self.

Mumukshu Preksha's response leads to an understanding that "utilization of one's human life" corresponds to official Jain discourse on the association between femininity and worldly life. Also, understanding and applying Jain philosophy in deciding one's future life has played a key role in the lives of both the cousins.

Expanding on Sadhvi Mukhyaniyojika's (2015) statement that every aspirant should have knowledge about metaphysics before they join the institute, Sadhvi Pranjalyasha (2015) continued,

We need ascetics who have knowledge about metaphysics, so that it gets easier for them to know Jain philosophy in more depth and apply the same in daily life. Mostly ascetics join the order and then they get in-depth knowledge about metaphysics.

This suggests that aspirants do understand karma and the cycle of birth and death, but in an informal way, lacking the knowledge of what the canonical texts present.

Aspirants understand just the basic underpinnings of what karma is and not on a scriptural level. Even if aspirants do know something of the scriptural treatment of karma, the number of aspirants who have had such metaphysical knowledge is small.

On asking one aspirant what it is that she would want or expect from training here at PSS, the *mumukshu* replied, "There is a lack of metaphysics education. If we get that training, it would be a great support for us in our ascetic life" (Mumukshu Dharti, 2015). This makes me understand that aspirants do expect such training from the institute but they fear to ask for it. The reason why they do not wish to speak out is unknown, since some rules and regulations have been modified to fit the ascetic life based on the requests of aspirants.

### **Merits of Previous Birth Bears Fruit in the Next Birth**

Another interesting answer that aspirants gave on why they chose this path came from one *mumukshu*,

I basically just used to listen to sermons, and not on a regular basis, just on Sundays. That too my parents forced me to join them. [But] I had the spark from beneath. I even believe that it is my *punya* (good) karmas that has made me take this decision (Mumukshu Kirti, 2015).

This answer helps us to understand that merits of this birth and previous births are treated as evidence supporting one's decision-making process to lead an ascetic life. Also, this shows that the previous good karma and bad karmas have led the aspirant to choose the path of liberation. I even interviewed a few aspirants who had to decide what they really wanted to do. There were aspirants who were not able to decide which life to lead, marriage or renunciation, as they were not clear if they really wanted to renounce; though they had an inkling of desire, they wavered for a long time. As Samani Rohit Prajna (2015) told me,

I had the aspiration to renounce, but it wasn't that I was against marriage. I was not against marriage or against renunciation. I was not able to decide which life to lead. My dad wanted me to get married. And it was that time I asked them for some time to let me decide if I want to marry or to renounce. I had to decide what I really wanted to do. I realized that, for the way I desired to lead my life, I felt that the ascetic life would be the right choice and so I decided to renounce.

This narrative draws a picture of making a decision with a rational mind. There are aspirants who join the institute with very little *vairagya*. How well you succeed in this path depends upon one's training, self-motivation and determination. Her *vairagya* became stronger at a later date, but it was basically her desires that made her aspire to lead an ascetic life. There were aspirants who joined the institute with less *vairagya* than Samani Rohit Prajna did, but not all ultimately renounced; a few left the institute as they felt that they could not proceed further in this path.

### **Aspiration through Symbolic Representation**

Samani Rohit Prajna's narrative led me to know the other reasons why aspirants join the institute. There were aspirants who were inspired by the *diksha* rituals of others and decided to join the monastic order:

Mumukshu Darshika: I had the aspiration, but never gave a serious thought on it. Upon seeing my *buwa* (aunt; father's sister), my aspiration got stronger and decided to join the ascetic path (Mumukshu Darshika, 2015).

Mumukshu Hetal: I had had the aspiration for a long time but always feared to join the PSS. I wasn't sure if I could really live this path or not. It was once I happened to attend the farewell ceremony of my friend from the *murtipujak* [image worshipping] sect who got the aspiration, and [she] decided to renounce within nine months of her aspiration time. I do not know if it's the song that was played in that farewell or it was seeing the rituals there or seeing the aspirant (my friend). The song and the rituals really moved me and I questioned myself, when she could decide in nine months, why am I taking such a long time? And then I decided to join this path (Mumukshu Hetal, 2015).

Mumukshu Ronak: I had an aspiration but couldn't decide for some unknown reason. I attended my *masi's* (mothers' sister) *diksha* ceremony; seeing the rituals and practices, I decided to renounce. Within five days I joined the institute. Along with me I had [another *mumukshu*] who joined the institute. She, like me, was inspired by seeing her sister renouncing the world and decided to take *diksha*. She joined the institute the next day of her sister's initiation. But in four months she left the training and decided to lead a lay life (Mumukshu Ronak, 2015).

The above narratives depict the religious symbols and concepts expressed in *diksha* and other initiation rituals and practices that make it possible for women to renounce. But it is not guaranteed that all aspirants will join the ascetic order. There are aspirants who leave the journey and lead a life as a layperson despite being attracted to the life of a renunciant. Aspirants inspired by the rituals to renounce, do not necessarily all succeed in their decision. Some may want to step back. This again brings up the point that *vairagya* can be strong or less strong, but it is on the aspirant how they live with the challenges of the ascetic life. Upon further questioning of the *samani* in charge of the PSS about what made some aspirants step back, she replied, "Aspirants who decide to step back are few, though if they desire to step back most of

the time it is because of health conditions, which doesn't let them to proceed further. There are [also] aspirants who do not want to proceed further in this path on their own will" (Samani Akshayprajna, 2015). All these above examples reveal that reasons to renounce vary from aspirant to aspirant, but each individual aspirant deals with the new life challenges in her own way and must decide to take the next step to become an ascetic or step back as a *shravika*.

### **Role of Karma in the Life of an Aspirant**

An aspirant's getting bonded to the deluding (*mohaniya*) karma, knowledge-obscuring (*jnanavarniya*) karma, painful (*vedaniya*) and obstacle-bearing (*antaraya*) karma results in obstacles to spiritual growth. Aspirants' responses definitely show that karma does play a significant role in their lives. As one aspirant noted:

What is the purpose of living? We live in this world, bond relationships, get close, which just lets us build karmas – deluding karmas that hinder our spiritual progress – [and] *antaraya* (obstacle-bearing) karma. By being an ascetic at least we restrict ourselves from building negative karmas (Mumukshu Namrata, 2015).

Such women make clear that aspirants want to get rid of all bad and good karmas. Building relationships too binds karma. In an ascetic life, one stops from building any relationship, putting one on a spiritual journey, on a ladder to reach liberation. Here it can be helpful to examine the role karma played in Mumukshu Kiran's life and the torments of the spirit that led to her death (discussed in Chapter 1).

The *samanis* at the PSS often say of the aspirants who go back to lay life that the major reason is health conditions. Here we see that *antaraya* karma dominates the *mohaniya* (deluding) karma. Jain doctrine considers karma to be minute particles of matter (*pudgala*), which get attached to the soul when it experiences passions and

attachments or engages in any sort of violent activity. An analogy often employed is that of a soul getting wet with attachment and subsequently attracting karmic particles, which bind with the soul and in effect obscure its innate qualities of infinite knowledge, infinite bliss, etc.<sup>31</sup> Before a karmic particle gets associated with a soul, it is undifferentiated; after an interaction between a karmic particle and a soul, the karma gets differentiated into various types (*prakṛti*) depending on its function. Mumukshu Kiran's *vedaniya* (painful) karma, *mohaniya* karma and *antaraya* karma were continuous hindrances to her spiritual growth. Though her dream to renounce the world was fulfilled, she could not live the life as an ascetic after her renunciation. This may be a result of her bad karmas from her previous birth along with enough good karma to at least renounce the world before her death. Mumukshu Kiran is considered the best example of the importance and interconnection of karma in a human's life.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrates that aspirants have a very informal, practice-based understanding of karma. Aspirants come to understand the philosophy of karma through their personal stories of how they came to join the institute. For some, joining the institute was in itself a result of good karma. For others, seeing the initiation rituals of others helped to shed karma and inspire *vairagya*, whereas for still others, intensions and everyday actions since joining the institute come to be seen as a means of self-analysis to realize life beyond themselves.

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<sup>31</sup> For a general introduction to Jain karma theory, see Dundas (2002) and Jaini (1979; 2000).

The descriptions presented by the *mumukshus* and nuns give us an idea about how women and aspirants deal with their differing aspiration levels, and brings to light how they create a space within the monastic community, wherein Jain *sadhvis* play a very dominant role for the community as a whole. *Mumukshus* dismissed living lives as mothers and wives as just a waste of time; this feeling, *vairagya*, gave them a chance to look beyond these options to see the importance of shutting down the flow of karmas and attaining the path to *moksha* by becoming ascetics as the best way to utilize this precious human birth.

From the narratives of *mumukshus* and nuns who described their experiences in different phases of the renunciation process, it is clear that there are numerous reasons for one to choose to renounce. One can say that to get this aspiration, the aspirant must feel that it was their right faith to understand the right knowledge and cultivate the right conduct. Different individuals—family, companions, and *acharyas*—will look at and test her character and renunciation capacities. Her passing or failing depends upon her capacity to encapsulate and perform the Jain qualities and ethics connected with *aparigraha* and *samyak jnana*. These variables are critical to creating and communicating *vairagya*, the key prudence required to walk the way of renunciation. The reasons may be many, including self-motivation, sermons of saints, previous birth karma, sudden realization, having a member of their family in the congregation, witnessing initiation rituals, etc., but the goal remains the same.

Now when the aspirant proves herself capable to join the lineage, she has to shed all previous possessions and worldly attachment through adherence to *aparigraha*. To harden her execution of Jain renunciation, this includes abandoning



her name; she thereby puts herself into a mode of subjectivity that seeks to understand ever more the Three Jewels of Jainism. Joining the institute was the first step toward this spiritual goal.

We have begun to see that there is a great difference, on the one hand, between the rhetoric of asceticism and the way that Terapanthis' express their desire to become ascetics, and, on the other, the everyday practicalities of being part of a religious community. These are always in tension with one another and show us that to be an ascetic is to be part of a community, alongside being an individual in pursuit of moksha. This tension will be highlighted in Chapters 3 and 4.

In the *Tattvartha Sutra*, Acharya Umaswati portrays *parigraha* as one of the primary causes of karmic influx. Umaswati examines the sources and components that result in the inflow of karma. As it is a known fact that the only way to attain moksha is to shed all bad karmas, thus this becomes the reason for the *mumukshu* to choose the path of renunciation and join this institute. This chapter examined the motivations behind an aspirant choosing the ascetic path, highlighting the importance of non-possession and the role of karma. In this chapter, one can see the vital connection of *aparigraha* and *moksha*.

### Chapter 3

#### Female Renouncers and Male Renunciation:

##### How Terapanthi Women Perform Nunhood

Renunciation within Indian religious traditions is gendered masculine. Jains consider renunciation a heroic act. This metaphor has been visible from its earliest period.

Unlike Hinduism and Buddhism, Jainism includes women as vital to the makeup and survival of the Jain community, ascetic and lay. On one hand, Jains today uphold a trope found in texts like the *Kalpa Sutra* of the “*caturvidhi sangha*,” the “fourfold community” that includes nuns and laywomen alongside monks and laymen. Without female renunciants, a Jain community (*sangha*) cannot be established. On the other hand, women in Indian culture are defined and described in relation to their familial ties, both natal and conjugal. As a result, in practice, despite religious doctrine, Jain women are primarily encouraged to aspire to the goals of motherhood and wifehood through promotion of the ideals and traits of the *shravika* (laywoman) and *pativrata* (devoted wife), instead of that of a *sadhvi* (fully ordained Jain nun) (Kelting 2009).

The *Acharanga Sutra* and the group of texts called the *mula sutras* (root texts) include the fundamental rules for mendicants to learn over the course of their monastic education. It consists of the rules of respect, devotion and politeness that all monks have to observe. In these texts, we find little about nuns. We find rules explicitly delineated for “monks and nuns” first in the *cheda sutras*, texts that deal with transgressions of monastic rules. These are, philologically speaking, a much later part of the canon (Glaser 1999, 118-121). This fact shows us that renunciation has been, from its inception, assumed to be a masculine undertaking.

The navigation of patriarchal religious spaces is vital to understanding how women wishing to renounce create alternative life options. This chapter seeks to contribute to the continuing academic discussion on female renunciation through its contribution and elucidation of the various methods, techniques, pathways and societal values and norms Terapanthi women have redefined, redirected, reorganized and implemented in order to enter the masculine gendered space of Jain renunciation. This chapter provides insight into how Jain women occupy and negotiate their marginal position within the Jain community and Indian society at large. As Kelting (2009) points out, the idea of what role a woman plays gives us the ability to think how gendered Indian—here, Jain—society is. A Jain woman has two career options—marriage or nunhood—but only one of which girls are actively encouraged to pursue. Meanwhile, males have a pool of career options including marriage and monkhood. Gendered differences do exist in all fields, even mendicancy; no one can deny it. This chapter will address the theoretical underpinnings of why the practices I have outlined in the previous chapters are the way they are.

In spite of outnumbering the monks, why are only female aspirants given institutionalized training? Not to be overlooked is the fact that it is more challenging for males than females to get parental consent and permission. Though in the Terapanth sect female aspirants say that they have a pool of opportunities in the monastic order in comparison to the limited possibilities of a *shravika* (laywoman), why is it that the gendered differences persist in monasticism? Is it scriptural or does there exist some other underlying reason? Through analyses of personal narratives of *mumukshus* and nuns, as well as observations of religious performances, I highlight

how, in the creation of female renunciant identities and subjectivities, males are prioritized over females. This remains so in spite of females now having more intellectual knowledge than males because decades of trained *sadhvis* and *samanis* have entered the ranks of the Terapanthi ascetic community. Still, females are willing and ready to accept the gendered differences. There persists a commonly held view that laywomen are demotivated to pursue careers, while laymen are not. Interestingly, this fieldwork gave me the idea that, though males are always viewed as smarter in all fields in comparison with women, women have made their importance, knowledge and experience into a symbol to prove how they have made their presence felt in this male gendered society.

This chapter focuses on *mumukshus*' and nuns' use and application of the symbolic structures of religious experience and doctrinal learning at the level of practice. Here, I have collected information from the interviews I conducted with *mumukshus* and nuns about their lives prior to and since their renunciation. I have also gathered data concerning initiation ceremonies and the experiences of the Jain nuns after initiation in the form of field notes and participant observation. I interviewed 55 aspirants and 30 ascetics in Kathmandu, Ladnun, Delhi, Jaipur, and Chennai. I felt I could learn even more from observing the rituals about the gendered coding of Jain renunciation to learn how Jain female renouncers think about what renunciation is. The Jain female renouncers I spoke with generally do not see these gendered differences as a hindrance to achieve their goal, as they believe strong dedication can win over all challenges.

## **Difference in Training between Male and Female Aspirants**

*Mumukshus* are always engrossed in the daily schedule of the PSS residence. All *mumukshus* confess that the environment and the functioning of the PSS is so planned and formalized that they never get a chance to think about the families they left behind (see Chapter 1). This intense training is part and parcel of ascetic life and appears to be an important aspect of training: to become dispassionate about passionate things. Practicing the vow of *aparigraha* (non-possession) is definitely the biggest challenge for every aspirant, male or female. Having said that, one question which I pondered throughout my fieldwork was: why is there no institutionalized training for the male aspirants of the Terapanth? Before confessing their wish to renounce the world to the Acharya, both male and female aspirants are on the same level. Then why is it that a female has to undergo institutionalized training? Additionally, why is their duration of training longer in comparison to males training? As this thesis concentrates on the training given to aspirants from 2005-2015, the formal records show that on average female aspirants spend around five to seven years at the PSS as a part of their training before renunciation; some even took nine years of training before renouncing. Meanwhile, a male aspirant would be trained for not more than a year before being initiated as a *sadhu*. Though some female aspirants did renounce within a year or two of joining the PSS, it was very rare. When I asked the Acharya about this issue, he replied,

Acharya Mahashraman; There was never the need (for a facility for males). The intake of male aspirants is very small; in fact you may not have any for a year. So they get trained under the monks and renounce.

Komal: But, Gurudev, if we look into the history of the PSS, the statistics of intake of aspirants have never been on a raising scale, it has always been fluctuating. Though, granted, there never came a

situation when there were no intakes. This means that since we have an institutionalized training for females, aspirants have been a part of the institute. Though this is not the sole reason, this seems to be one reason. By this what I am trying to say is that, as you have PSS uniquely for females, if another PSS exists uniquely for males, maybe monks should have been more in number in comparison to now?

Acharya Mahashraman: It is not that we did not have institutionalized training for male aspirants, but there were times when we had no male aspirants or just one aspirant during a year. And then having an entire management [staff] look after [a facility] for no one or just one ends up being a burden for the laity and ascetic community. So it is easier to get trained under monks.

He was pretty confident of this scenario of occasionally having no one to train, and I felt his view to be most probably right. Still not getting satisfied with his answer, I asked him again:

Komal: Forgive me if my way of presenting in words is wrong, but don't you think with the change in time there must be a PSS uniquely for males too?

Acharya Mahashraman: If in future, if time demands for one then [we] definitely would think about it, but as of now senior monks take care of male aspirants and it is going on well (Acharya Mahashraman, 2015).

From one point of view, the Acharya is correct: to run a facility for no one or only one aspirant would present tension. But having said that, the problem which I have is with the *de facto* double standard in training each gender receives. It is like every male gets a superior kind of close mentoring in religious education, while women get a pre-formed, one-size-fits-all approach to ascetic training at the PSS. Thus, not saying that PSS should go away, but that a woman's learning should be recognized for what it is and her authority and leadership of the community should be commensurate with it. Though training under the Acharya is considered to be prestigious, women who are trained at the PSS is more thorough and rigorous. And

they are more in number in comparison to men. Thus, this suggests the very existence of the formal institution gives women a beacon to know that their aspiration to join the ascetic order is welcomed by the Terapanth.

In a sense, if women are thought to have the superior education, it seems like the problem with the close mentoring of males is that they are treated as worthy of a superior, close mentoring situation, which, with the number of PSS-trained *samanis* and *sadhvis* in the Terapanth now could be done on the same model for women. The sexism is so blinding here. I think there will never come a day when the sexist monastic rules demanding the separation of the sexes will be overturned in favor of a training of the best qualified with the best teachers, without regard to gender. Acharya Mahahraman is not the only Jain who would see a problem with a total meritocracy model, as the point of education for a monk or nun is not to push scholarship or knowledge forward, but to master what was once known and established so long ago. Even the PSS is not really about creating a “cutting edge” in knowledge about Jainism, though the JVBI may be about this.

The male aspirants are trained directly under the monks and are under the constant supervision of the Acharya; male aspirants consider this supervision to be a blessing from the Acharya. When I asked the female aspirants at the PSS if they want to get trained like the male aspirants or continue their institutionalized training, none denied that getting blessed to train under the Acharya is definitely the best thing. But they also urged me not to forget that the PSS is the biggest boon and blessing from the Acharya; what they gain from the PSS no other institute can give. Sadhvi Siddharth Prabha (2015) added, “Every aspirant before renouncing must taste this

training which would give them a picture perfect idea of what life is after renunciation.”

These responses present a picture that women feel grateful that they, as women, get anything at all and are quite resigned to being separate and unequal. Thus, they make clear that a female aspirant, even if she is advanced in knowledge and ability, cannot get direct apprentice training under even an experienced *sadhvi*: they are still required to be trained in the PSS. A male aspirant, regardless of knowledge or acumen, gets very close training under a monk. It is not an issue to be addressed only within the monastic order; when we look at the laity, they too consider monks to have superior knowledge and power in comparison to nuns. Lay attendance to listen to the sermons of monks is almost always higher in number to that of nuns’ sermons. It is not that male figures exploit their education, but that monks are viewed as superior.

While returning to India from Kathmandu, I was still depressed as the answers to my questions about gendered differences were right but left me unsatisfied, as the reasons for not having male institutionalized training were just being overlooked. The reasons stated by Acharya Mahashraman were correct, but what motivated me is an incident that I happened to see during my last day of field work in Kathmandu. It was my last day there and I was interacting with a few monks. During this conversation, one monk was interested in knowing what the nuns are doing and planning to do in the near future. Because they cannot interact with the nuns directly, they took me for a go-between. I was curious to know why a monk would want to know what a nun is doing. When I questioned the monk in this regard, he replied:



*Sadhvis* and *samaniji* are blessed to have an institutionalized training before joining this path. They get ample opportunity to explore their talents and to read the Jain scriptures before they become a part of this monastic order. I wish even we monks could get this training. It's not just that education which they get from that institute, but *sadhvis* and *samanis* get an experience of knowing what to do and what not to do at a given time. I was just wanting to know what they are doing so that if that interests me I could also do that or I could think about alternatives hence from then.<sup>32</sup>

The monk admitted that monks are not trained before renunciation but in comparing the experience to that of the nuns and their training from PSS, he wished he could have had similar training. This made me feel blissful leaving Kathmandu that day because I saw that women in the Terapanth order are flourishing there. I could see female ascetics had a pool full of opportunities to be grabbed, lived and experienced. Females are not suppressed in this sect but with the duration of their training they have actually won the opportunity to be trained to lead a successful, peaceful, yet gendered life ahead. Thus, the monk's confession makes it clear that females are superior in education to their male counterparts, yet held back from leadership simply because of cultural gender roles that have nothing to do with spiritual advancement.

On further observations, I saw various forms of authority which female renouncers do have in the Terapanth. For example, they are given the titles of *Sadhvi Pramukha*, *Mukhya Niyojika*, *Shashan Gaurav*, *Niyojika*.<sup>33</sup> All of these positions of authority, however, are only in reference to the community of female ascetics. These are not "tradition wide" positions of authority. We might even insist that these exist

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<sup>32</sup> Name not to be disclosed to protect the anonymity of the person.

<sup>33</sup> These are titles allotted within the congregation. *Sadhvi Pramukha* – Head of all female ascetics, *Mukhya Niyojika* – who is the next in hierarchy after *Sadhvi Pramukha*, *Shashan Gaurav* – post which literally means the 'pride of the congregation,' *Niyojika* – Head of all *samanis*.

because monks cannot have too close contact with the female mendicants, and these positions have little to do with the superiority of women's learning or knowledgeable ability. Would a woman ever be Acharya? One reason to deny a woman to be an *acharya* is from the widespread mindset within the Indian tradition that men are decision makers, while women are too emotional and cannot have a hand in certain decision-making processes because of that emotional proclivity.

The training given at the PSS is definitely an advantage to the female aspirants in comparison with the male aspirants. The secluded social environment, strict and highly disciplined rules and regulations, hierarchy of aspirants and teachers, and educational requirements serve as an all-encompassing method of training which is a glimpse of the monastic life, and the kind of training which the male aspirants are not getting. It allows female aspirants, future nuns, to outstrip the education levels of the monks. Still, monks hold a higher position in the hierarchy of the order and in the esteem of the laity.

### **Symbolic Representation of *Aparigraha***

To understand how Jain female renunciants have created a space for themselves in a patriarchal religion, I first asked all aspirants why they chose to renounce. On getting varied answers, I saw the differences between their original intentions and the desires they are permitted to articulate, namely, that they experienced *vairagya* and desired to pursue *moksha*. And yet they are community leaders, teachers, scholars, public figures, even proselytizers who travel internationally, as mentioned in previous chapters. Female aspirants chose this path to attain *moksha*, which is the ultimate goal, but primarily they either wanted to utilize their intellectual gifts or did not want

to marry or realized that human birth is most precious and moksha can be attained only from human birth. As stated, there are three central pillars or gems of Jainism: right faith, right knowledge and right conduct. When an aspirant starts practicing the five great vows, though not following them as fully as a *sadhvi* would follow the five great vows after renunciation, practicing non-possession begins as a first step: the aspirant has to perform her *vairagya*, disinterest towards worldly things.

Despite the varying definitions of *parigraha*, possession, they all hold that the term entails working towards the accumulation of something or some things and claiming it for oneself, to make something one's own, claiming that it belongs to them and only them. Pujoyapada, a fifth-sixth-century Digambar *acharya*, grammarian and saint, extends the standard definitional parameters of this term, stating, "The external objects by themselves are not possessions, but the feelings of ownership and associated activities are indeed attachment and *parigraha*" (K. Jain 2004, 397). As such, non-possession only occurs when a person's feelings of ownership or belonging are eliminated. Only when one ceases to be attached to external objects is *parigraha* severed. Expanding upon *parigraha* as a form of violence or *himsa*, Gunabhadra, the fifth-century author of the *Atmanushasana*, further states that *parigraha* is a form of violence against oneself. According to Gunabhadra, *parigraha* is like a deep well of desires that never ends (ibid., 398). If one considers all living beings to have a never-ending well of desires, how will any of them every find happiness or peace? Gunabhadra states there is no way to fill a well with no end. As such, "desire or lust for worldly possessions will keep on giving pain to them" (ibid.). The only means by which one can plug the well and find happiness is through *aparigraha*. Chapter Nine

of the *Tattvartha Sutra* continues Umaswati's discourse concerning Jain karma theory, focusing on the stoppage and dissociation of karmas. *Tattvartha Sutra* 9.35 states, "Dwelling on the perpetration of violence, falsehood, theft, and preservation of one's possessions is wrathful meditation. People who are at the lower spiritual stages of non-abstinence and partial abstinence are subject to it." (Tatia 1994, 238).<sup>34</sup>

### **Social and Religious Norms**

It is significant to note that in the *Tattvartha Sutra*, another term used for one who is still attached to the world is *parigrahita*, commonly used to describe a married woman (K. Jain 2004, 269). As mentioned above, women have just two options, marriage or renunciation. As renunciation comes to be a symbol of non-possession, marriage becomes the symbol of possession towards the world. Surprisingly, a male form of this term, which would connote a married man, is not present in the *Tattvartha Sutra*. Female renouncers extend the association to their own everyday worlds in order to buoy their claims to renunciation. In extending my argument of marriage as equal to "the world," one realizes that in refusing to marry and choosing to live as a *sadhvi*, a Jain woman must also give up those things and individuals that would play a critical role in their married life—their biological and future affinal families.

In electing to renounce, a Jain woman must dispossess herself of her family members and any other relative or social friend that was gained through their familial ties. The reason why I am bringing this point is that a married woman is held

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<sup>34</sup> *himsanrta-steya-vishaya-samrakshanebhyo raudramavirata-deshaviratayoh.*

responsible not only for the normal chores of household, but apart from that she has to make sure she keeps the family relations intact. By which I mean she has to make sure the family bonding between all relationships goes on a strong bonding and if anything is considered to be causing family politics then it is definitely because of the “married women” of a household. Meanwhile, a man is just responsible for raising the family and he shall be responsible for the financial and major decisions to be made. Thus, a female aspirant should demonstrate that she would be ready to give away all her worldly relations to renounce.

Jaini (1991) presents the Digambara Jain belief that women are incapable of renunciation. This has been an issue of debate between the different Jain sects for centuries. The Digambaras argue that because women are physically weaker, they are incapable of enduring the harshness of renunciation. Shvetambaras agree that women are physically weaker, but do not hold it sufficient proof that they cannot renounce completely. Sakatayana, a Digambar Jain grammarian, compounds the notion of the inferiority of women and, by association, their inability to renounce the world. He writes, “Women are excessively devious and fickle, that they lack the intellectual, forensic, and supernatural powers of advanced male spiritual adepts, and that they lack the physical, moral and spiritual courage of men” (Jaini 1991, xvii). There is a center run by a charismatic Digambar Jain nun, Gyanmati Mataji, in Hastinapur, a town considered to be a holy place by Jains, where Lord Rishab (the first Jina) was offered *bhiksha* (food to break a fast).<sup>35</sup> In interacting with the laity there, I was told

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<sup>35</sup> It is almost completely unknown for a woman to become the Acharya of any tradition. Acharya Gyanmatiji is an exception. Her personality and charisma has gained her a large following, which allowed her to establish her own lineage within the Digambar tradition.

by one person that Acharya Gyanmati Mataji, too, considers that she cannot attain moksha. Interestingly, this person said that the reason stated by her was not the period of history, but the female body that she has. She confesses that she would want a male birth to attain *moksha*.<sup>36</sup> This was interesting as in spite of holding an Acharya position she understands herself as spiritually weaker than men.

### **Challenging Performances of Aspirants**

The effects of Sakatayana's and Jain doctrine's imagining of women as emotional and unstable extends beyond doctrinal prescriptions. As a result, women such as Mumukshu Dharti incurred many hardships to get permission to renounce. Her grandmother was not ready to grant her permission; she confessed that her grandmother told her, "You can stay back home without getting married, but I would never grant you permission for renunciation." Pressing further, I asked how she showed her readiness to renounce,

Mumukshu Dharti: I [took to keeping a diet of] two *dravya*.

Komal: Two *dravyas*? (*Dravya* here means the number of food items taken in a day.)

Mu. Dharti: In spite of this she was not ready to grant me permission. Then I decided to move ahead without her permission.

Komal: Is she satisfied with your decision now?

Mu. Dharti: No she still doesn't speak to me (Mumukshu Dharti, 2015).

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<sup>36</sup> According to Jainism, time is beginning less and eternal. The *Kālacakra* (time cycle), the cosmic wheel of time, rotates ceaselessly. The wheel of time is divided into two half-rotations, *Utsarpiṇī* or ascending time cycle and *Avsarpiṇī*, the descending time cycle, occurring continuously after each other. *Utsarpiṇī* is a period of progressive prosperity and happiness where the time spans and ages are at an increasing scale, while *Avsarpiṇī* is a period of increasing sorrow and immorality with decline in timespans of the epochs. Currently, the time cycle is in an *avasarpiṇī* or descending phase with the following epochs.

At a young age, *Mumukshu* Dharti enacted the performance of conviction, detachment and strength in order to get her parents to concede. She had to undergo extreme measures to try to gain her grandmother's permission. She had to fast on two *dravya*, but still her grandmother was not ready. But her strength and firmness in her decision were shown by her ability to enact her faith and belief that living the life of a *sadhvi* was the only way for her. She transformed her renunciation decision into a conviction. Luckily, her parents were ready to grant her permission; many of the other women whom I know personally, as I have seen this tradition from my birth, were not so fortunate.

This was an example of a Jain female aspirant's struggle to get permission; equally difficult were the struggles of many male aspirants. As female aspirants are greater in number, the narratives about them are more numerous, which makes it appear as if that female aspirants face a greater challenge to get permission to renounce the world. I see a double standard here. On the one hand, women have to demonstrate their virtue and resolve to renounce because of how women are regarded in both doctrine and in Indian society in general. On the other hand, there is less at stake in letting one's daughter or granddaughter renounce than there is in letting a son renounce, mainly because of the son's duty to provide for the family economically, making a family less inclined to allow them to renounce. Since I was born and brought up within the same congregation, I have experienced and heard many hardships of male aspirants to get permission granted from their families. Their struggles were immense, but how strong and determined every aspirant remained was

the major factor for every aspirant in proving their detachment from the world and their resolve to enter the monastic order.

Yet, surprisingly, the training durations for males and females differ. And the training period for males is much shorter in comparison with females. Males renounce earlier and get most of the education after renunciation, unlike female aspirants who get most of the education and training beforehand. Regardless of when Jain women go for *diksha adeshya* (official permission to renounce the world), whether it is one year or 12 years after joining the PSS, their first step derives from their own self-confidence in their ability to brook the difficulties associated with the radical life of renunciation.<sup>37</sup> Once parental permission is received and the aspirant has decided that she is ready, she goes directly to the Acharya to express her desire for *diksha*. With the permission from the Acharya she then starts her journey as an aspirant at the PSS. Now she embarks on a series of practices through which symbolic structures of renunciation emerge and, to that extent, begin the creation of their new Jain renunciant subjectivities.

Now, it is the decision of the Acharya to decide if the aspirant is really capable of the ascetic life or not. If an aspirant has parental consent to renounce but the Acharya feels that she or he is still not capable to get trained for the ascetic life, he will say something like, “Practice on more of Jain values and principles and once you have known some and if you still want to renounce, then come at that time, we shall think about it” (Samani Shukla Prajna, 2015). Now, the question arises of what

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<sup>37</sup> *Diksha*, which translates as a “preparation or consecration for a religious ceremony,” is the giving of a *mantra* or an initiation by the guru. The word is derived from the Sanskrit root *dā* (“to give”) plus *kṣi* (“to destroy”) or alternately from the verbal root *dīkṣ* (“to consecrate” or “to initiate”). The meaning of *adesh* is “instruction” or “command.”



if parental permission is not granted to the aspirant. Until and unless parental permission is produced, the aspirant cannot get trained or join the order. The aspirant who had parental consent but not her grandmother's waited to get her permission for two years. Though her grandmother was not ready, the aspirant's parents were. Hence, since just parental consent is required, she was granted permission to get trained at the PSS. But it is important to note that, until her grandmother grants her permission, she cannot join the ascetic order. This is because if she were ordained, then conflict would arise between grandmother and parents, which would violate the principle of non-violence. Thus, though it is important for an aspirant to have *vairagya*, consent from the family plays an equally vital role.

### **Strict Adherence to Celibacy for Mendicants**

Shvetambar Terapanth *sadhvis* were heavily concerned with adhering to and publicly demonstrating strict adherence to *shil* (pronounced 'sheel'; Skt., *śīla*). In Jain practice, *shil* translates as moral sexual conduct or celibacy; it is heavily associated with the *mahavrata* of *brahmacarya*. It is about behaving in such a way as to never have a question brought up about her virtue; it means that her sexuality remains well guarded. In my fieldwork, I witnessed Jain female renouncers performing a wide range of Jain practices, values and principles embodying the five vows, viz., *ahimsa*, *aparigraha*, *satya*, *asteya* and *brahmacarya*. These practices create the identities of all Jain renouncers, female and male. I would prefer "chastity" as the interpretation of *shil*, as it encompasses not just literal sexual abstinence, but also a host of behaviors thought to show a woman's purity, moral uprightness, and lack of any kind of sexual

or even flirtatious behavior, all of which evinces a pure mind, free of licentious thoughts.

In the *Tattvartha Sutra*, Umaswati expounds upon particular rules of conduct for all Jain renouncers to aid in upholding the *brahmacharya* vow at all times. There are several guiding rules regulating the interactions between female and male renunciants, all in the hopes of guarding and protecting their sexual morality. This rhetoric constructs women as sexual temptresses, justifying why it is vital to keep the two sexes segregated in the renunciant communities. To cite a few commonly used examples, *Draupadi* was married to the five Pandava brothers of the *Mahabharata*; Sadhvi Sundari, daughter of Lord Rishab, attracted Bharata with her beauty;<sup>38</sup> Rathanemi was attracted by the beauty of Mahasati Rajimatiji (Kelting 2009); the second head of female ascetics of the Shvetambar Terapanth tradition, Sadhvi Pramukha Gulaba, had to apply coal, or sometimes cover her entire face during *vihar* (wandering on foot), to hide her beauty (Sadhvi Kalpalata 2011, 184ff.). The above examples are about Jain women being considered examples of sexual temptation for men.<sup>39</sup> Sethi (2012, 64) recalls a Murtipujak *sadhvi* retelling a narrative supporting her claims that even Jain women who have renounced and obtained the ultimate and most pure way of life according to Jainism are still objects of sexual temptation for men. Jain nuns are a temptation from which Jain male renouncers need to be guarded.

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<sup>38</sup> However, to make Bharata understand that beauty is temporary, Sundari started the *ayambil tapas* (a fast wherein the practitioner eats just once a day, a bland grain cooked without salt or sugar) when Bharata went to war; during the process of fasting she lost all her beauty. When he returned from war, he asked the whereabouts of Sundari, not recognizing that she was standing in front of him.

<sup>39</sup> There are Jain versions of these stories, including the *Mahabhartaha*.

Instead of outright denying any interaction between the sexes, Umaswati allows engagements with the opposite sex on one condition: Jain nuns and monks must obtain permission in every instance from the *acharya* of the *sangha*. If they want to meet and engage in conversation, even then there must be a stated purpose to every interaction between the *sadhus* and *sadhvis*. Both major sects and all sub-sects of Jainism strictly enforce this rule. Svetambar Terapanthi *sadhvis* must obtain permission to speak with their fellow male renunciants in the same fashion.<sup>40</sup> In the *Dasavaiikalika Sutra* we can find the rules about the lay-mendicant interactions between the sexes (*Dasavealayam* 2012, 8.45). In addition to not touching, several *samanis* also outlined for me some recently established rules to shore up the divisions between male and female renouncers in the Terapanth:

1. A *sadhvi* cannot have a personal one-to-one conversation with a *shravak* (layman), and similarly a *sadhu* cannot have a personal one-to-one conversation with a *shravika* (laywoman); if they intend to do so, the minimum distance of conversation between them should be 1.5 arm-lengths. In addition, they must make sure that another *sadhvi* or *sadhu* is in a close proximity, not more than a distance of 7 arm-lengths away.
2. A *sadhu* or *sadhvi* cannot meet a *shravak* or a *shravika* respectively after sunset for any kind of conversation. If they intend to meet, then laity and the

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<sup>40</sup> While I also had to obtain the Acharya's permission to interview and conduct research with Jain female renunciants within the Svetambar Terapanth organization, I did not have to seek permission from the acharya each time I went to work with the *sadhvis*, *samanis* and *mumukshus*; however, I did to speak with the *munis*. When I had to interview the nuns or *samanis* or *mumukshus*, I had to seek permission to speak with the respective head of each group, but when seeking permission to speak with the women, it was always made clear to me that this was only a formality. *Mumukshus*, female and male, must also obtain permission in the same way during their training.

ascetic should stand under different roofs to converse. Recently, Acharya Mahashraman has made it mandatory that, whatever the emergency is, a *shravak* or *shravika* cannot meet a *sadhvi* or *sadhu*, respectively, after sunset. If it is real urgent then a *sharvak* can convey the message to *sadhu* and a *shravika* to a *sadhvi*.

3. No layperson can offer any objects or food or any book or anything else to an ascetic after sunset (Samani Shukla Prajna and Samani Rohit Prajna, 2015).

To make this part of her practice, a *mumukshu* is also supposed to follow the five major vows as closely as possible. Umaswati outlined similar rules concerning interactions between female and male renunciants, advocating for the strict and austere segregation of the sexes. Jainism prohibits female renunciants from visiting *munis* (monks) after sunset and vice versa. There are separate residences for each group of renunciants. When walking towards the same area, Jain *sadhvis* will purposely stop and allow the *munis* to walk ahead of them to create more distance and space between them. Terapanth *sadhvis* take additional precautions to ensure that the *brahmacarya* vow is not broken and their *shil* remains intact. Aside from obvious precautions such as not touching men or perpetual segregation of Jain *sadhvis* and *munis*, when engaging in conversation or any activity in close proximity to a male—lay or renunciant—Jain *sadhvis* have several practices that contribute to their overall performance of moral conduct.

While in Nepal, I recall a specific instance of trying to hand an object to a *sadhu*. It was during the time of the earthquake; I wanted to interact with the *Sadhvi* Pramukha and a few nuns who renounced between 2005 and 2015, so I took a trip to

Birgunj. When I returned to Kathmandu from Birgunj, I was handed a confidential letter to be given to the Acharya, which I had to deliver to him myself. I reached Kathmandu when the sun was about to set. Around the Acharya's seat, there is a small fence to maintain the minimum distance from females and nuns. The Acharya was engaged in some writing; I bowed my head and after getting blessed took the letter from my bag and tried to pass it to him. He signaled to me to place the letter down on the floor, but I was not clear what he was indicating. When I tried to take a step further, immediately a monk, who was seated near the Acharya, stood up and, from a distance, told me to put it down on the floor. This way of passing things is also observed at the PSS from *mumukshu* to the *sayojak* (manager of the PSS) and vice versa. To bring this into practice, the aspirants are given this kind of training from the day they join the institute. If *mumukshus* have to hand or take anything from a person of the opposite sex (usually the management of the institute), they have to bashfully smile and lower their heads, and items were to be passed without touching each other.<sup>41</sup> Similar interactions took place between *sadhvis* and *munis* during my time in the field.

The PSS gives *mumukshus* the right knowledge and guides them toward the right practices of renunciation, introducing them to what life will be like after renunciation and instructing them with regard to how an *upasika* or *mumukshu* should lead life as a *samani* or *sadhvi*. When I asked the *mumukshus* what they think about the absence of male institutionalized training, none knew the answer nor took any interest in the question. Sadhvi Khyatyasha (2015) told me,

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<sup>41</sup> Field notes taken from Kathmandu, Nepal and Ladnun, Rajasthan, India. 2015.

We left the world to live and know the self and we don't want to indulge into why and what the reason is for the absence of male institutionalized training. Acharyashriji decides what is good for the community and the congregation. So there must be a valid reason or reasons for this absence; and anyways we are successfully living the life for which we left the world, so penance and reaching moksha is our goal.

This answer appears to be crisp and clear from the renouncer point of view because, for a renouncer who decided to leave the material world behind, gender does not matter. Further, this congregation gives women more opportunities for education and exposure for their talent than many other traditions they are aware of. Nonetheless, males are not suppressed or demotivated.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter emphasizes the importance of attending to both discursive and performative constructions of gender and renunciation amongst Jain female renouncers through analyses of their personal narratives and religious performances, in the crafting of their renunciant subjectivities and identities. Terapanthi Jain ladies looking to repudiate hold irregular positions inside of the Jain group and Indian culture on the loose. Ladies' parts in Indian culture are described and formed by prevailing patriarchal belief systems and establishments and focused on thoughts of home life. As Indian society serves as a kind of perspective point for the doctrinal solutions for Hindu, Buddhist and Jain ladies, it gets to be clear that an investigation of how Jain ladies looking to repudiate explore the channels and courses to go into customarily male religious spaces of renunciation, initiative and power is called for. It is fundamental to see how Indian ladies—in any case on the off chance that they try to revoke or look to carry on with the life of a solitary working lady—make elective

life alternatives. In analyzing the social and religious procedures that empower Indian ladies to end up Jain sadhvis, this exploration explains the pathways, methods, values and societal standards that ladies have reclassified, diverted and revamped with a specific end goal to make a substantial spot for female religiosity in Jainism.

## Chapter 4

### Understanding Child Aspirants: Initiating Girls into Nunhood

“Courage is not the absence of fear but the judgement that something else is more important than fear. The brave may not live forever but the cautious do not live at all. For now you are travelling the road between who you think you are and who you can be.”

- Meg Cabot

*Diksha*, initiation into the ascetic order, is one of the most auspicious steps in the Jain world. Despite holding ascetics in the highest esteem as embodiments of the Jain ideal of seeking liberation, and despite the fact that parents of ascetics say they are proud of their children for choosing this hard life, many Jain parents restrict their children from following this path. “It’s good for the other people’s kids, but not my own” – I have heard this frequently over the years. Many people wonder if there is some reason why the child could not fulfill a “normal life.” Explaining the concept of renunciation today is difficult; it gets even more challenging when trying to explain the idea of *bal-diksha*, or the initiation of children under 16 into mendicancy. Child initiation within the Jain monastic orders is not a new, innovative step; *bal-diksha* has been evident in history for centuries. Child ascetics (*bal-sadhus* or *bal-sadhvis*) follow the same five major vows as adult ascetics do.

This situation led to a controversial legal issue within the Jain Shvetambar tradition. Though *bal-diksha* is a controversial legal issue, Jains have had it confirmed by the courts in India that it is not criminal. The legal issues raised by opponents of *bal-diksha*—citing the *Juvenile Justice Act* of 2000 and the UN’s *Convention of the Rights of the Child*—were that children were being deprived of the childhood to which they have a right to as an Indian citizen, lacking education, and being forced to



beg for alms that results in improper diet and health care (Luithle-Hardenberg 2015). On the other hand, the *Vyavahara Sutra* (10.22) claims that any child who is nine years old, starting from the time when the child is in the mother's womb, can renounce the world.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Jain ascetics have long felt that the *vairagya* of the aspirant was more important than his or her age, because it is not a karmic call of merely this birth but the collective result of all previous births.

In this chapter, I discuss the importance of the *bal-diksha* for the Jain community. We will hear the voices of several young girls who chose this path and are currently training in the PSS. I examine the way the congregation and the institute is held responsible for the spiritual development of child aspirants, who will be the future of the Jain monastic order. Most importantly, we can see the way that child aspirants are shaped and trained to know what renunciation is. However, tensions can arise among the senior aspirants for having the responsibility to train girls as young as nine. I argue that, while child initiation is important to the vitality of the Terapanth, the voices of the senior aspirants who express difficulties with being asked to raise the juniors should not be ignored.

### **Child Initiation: History**

Looking into the history of the Terapanth sect, *bal-diksha* has been quite common. The present Acharya of the Terapanth is the eleventh. Excluding the first Acharya, Acharya Bhikshu, all other Acharyas renounced as children and went on to lead illustrious careers as mendicants (Sadhvi Pramukha Kanakprabha 1999; Muni

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<sup>42</sup> The *Vyavahara Sutra* is the third of the *Cheda Sutras*, the portion of the Shvetambar canon dealing with monastic conduct and initiation rules.

Dhanajaya Kumar and Sadhvi Vishrutvibha 2010; Sadhvi Sanghamitra 2006). This is not to say that only if one renounces at a young age can one become a leader. If we look into the list of Sadhvi Pramukhas (heads of all nuns in the congregation), it was only Sadhvi Pramukha Gulaba and Sadhvi Pramukha Kankavar who renounced at a young age; the remaining seven Sadhvi Pramukhas renounced as adults (Sadhvi Kalpalatha 2011). In light of these ascetic pioneers and their contemporary successors, it is clear that Terapanthis do not consider that spiritual qualifications need to be acquired, but are instead the result of good deeds accumulated from previous lifetimes. Accordingly, the factors relating to accepting a child as an aspirant are: the spark of spiritual calling, interest in joining the monastic order, and permission from parents and the Acharya. The supporters of *bal-diksha* relied on scriptural texts, and as scriptures nowhere forbid or discourage child initiation, they take seriously the spiritual concerns expressed by the child. Supporters stress that the inward inclination to renounce the world (*vairagya*) is not age-dependent (Luithle-Hardenberg 2015). Only those who have performed meritorious karma in a previous birth can take this courageous step; the earlier one makes this decision, the better it is for their spiritual growth. One can attain liberation only from human birth, and only by following the strict ascetic life. Here, the training period of a child aspirant plays a very crucial role.

### **Child Aspirants: An Inspiration**

One would think that being born and brought up as a Terpanthi, and spending 25 years of my life as a Terpanthi *shravika*, I would have been ready for my meeting with the *samani* in charge of the PSS, another *samani*, and the aspirants at the

*jnanshala* (*samanis*' residence). Apart from doing my fieldwork at the PSS, I was a part of the Jain Summer School Program at JVBI. I reached my room around noon and decided to freshen up before heading to class for the day. But on opening my bag, I saw that my iPad, some clothes, books and a few other important things were missing from my bag. I panicked and decided to file a complaint about my lost materials. I spent one entire day moving from Ladnun to a nearby small town's police station, but I was just being forwarded to a further destination; no one was ready to file my complaint. Why, what, who, when, how, where—these questions did not lead to a desire to “fix” the problem. Rather, I became disgusted with the people of my neighborhood, developing an ill attitude towards all of humanity. I came back to my room with the feeling of losing my most valuable belongings. I had to get out of this feeling as the next days were filled with my fieldwork. It was a tough challenge to act neutral after the loss of my possessed objects.

This feeling of losing such precious things made me really wonder how one can renounce the entire world and live life in the Jain monastic order. This path can be considered only after you are mature enough to decide your own future. But how can kids decide upon such hard decisions? How can kids take on this challenge? The first push back against these thoughts was when I saw child sadhus and *sadhvis* in Kathmandu; the second biggest shock was in Ladnun at the PSS. At present in the PSS there are 44 *mumukshus*, among whom 14 are under age 16. On seeing them at the PSS, the sad feeling of losing my things developed into numbness, a sort of detachment. I was no longer interested in filing a complaint about my lost belongings. I no longer wished to buy new ones. This detached feeling is the one required from an

aspirant. No, I still didn't wish to join the monastic order. It was just a feeling which was good for a change.

### **Parental Approval the First Challenge for Child Aspirants**

I asked most of the adult aspirants why they chose this path, but I never wanted to ask these kids why they did. Instead, I was curious to know how they conveyed this aspiration to their family. As we have seen in previous chapters, adult aspirants face a challenge to get permission; how could kids convince their parents? Whether joining PSS is *bal-diksha* or not, parental consent and the aspirant's written consent stating that it is her will to join PSS is required.<sup>43</sup> My interview with the child aspirants (ranging in age from 11 to 16) was a group interview. This interview was the most fun-filled I conducted, as the answers these aspirants gave were not only real and factual, but their innocence and ability to understand what renunciation is was really interesting. Also, the way they mocked each other during the interview added fun and liveliness to the interview. Answers again varied.

I asked them, "How difficult was it to get permission granted from your parents?"

Mumukshu Pragya: (Pointing to her cousin-sister) We both are cousin-sisters. I aspired to join the institute a year ago, but my parents weren't ready to grant me permission. Then in 2014, from the PSS several *mumukshu* sisters had visited our place for Paryushan Parva,<sup>44</sup> and it

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<sup>43</sup> In the *Uttaradhyayana Sutra* (14; 19.84), we can find a multi-step process that begins with the desire within the aspirant to renounce. The aspirant then confesses it to their parents; parents should at first refuse to test their child's aspiration level. After some long discussions between the aspirant and parents, at last the parents should grant permission to their child to renounce the world. From this, we infer that parental consent is required before renouncing the world. In the Terapanthi tradition, as I have shown, the written and oral consent of both parents and aspirants is mandatory.

<sup>44</sup>Paryushan Parva is the most auspicious festival for a Jain. Every Jain is asked to practice the principles of Jainism to utmost strictness on this festival. This festival is an 8 day practice. As a part of training the female aspirants are sent to different locations to celebrate Paryushan Parva where the ascetics cannot reach and spread sermons. During this Paryushan Parva, female aspirants play a role to

was upon seeing them [that I developed the desire to renounce]; and it was they who spoke on behalf of us to our parents and they made our parents get “ok” with this idea. Still permission was pending and in [the] course of time along with me, my cousin too wanted to join the Institute. But it is to be noted that it wasn’t easy to get permission granted from our parents. But it was [through the] Guru’s blessing that we are here (Mumukshu Pragya, 2015).

Mumukshu Anchal: I did not have [the] guts to face my grandfather. I feared him a lot, but I had to confess my aspiration and I wrote a letter to my grandfather (All child aspirants present there laughed) (Mumukshu Anchal, 2015).

The parental obligation on the initial stage appears to be a strategy used by parents to test the will power of their child if they can overcome the challenges in the ascetic life. Though parents cannot give their children an exact picture, they try to test their children in their own way; upon gaining confidence in their seriousness, they grant permission to their children. This suggests that it is just not that children have to do it, but that parents have their legitimate concerns. It is hard for kids to ask, because parents are likely to say no. It is hard to tell parents something about oneself that they did not expect or want for their child.

The relationship between a child and a parent is so unique, as every child is unique. Parents do not grant permission, fearing various scenarios. One major reason is that, if their child is not able to follow the path, what will happen if they wish to come back to the normal world? The rhetoric of the seriousness of *diksha* itself becomes a way to curb just anyone from becoming an ascetic. Without explicitly stating that returning to household life is forbidden, aspirants implied that serious consequences in the form of public disdain and negative karma accrual ensues if one

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spread sermons. This in a way gives them an experience to view the challenge one faces during giving sermons. As an ascetic it becomes the major routine to spread sermons. What is the “this” in the previous sentence? PSS has given the female aspirants a way to live this experience.

does. Jain women, or any aspirant wishing to renounce, begin the renunciation journey with the idea that they will not and cannot return to household life. The consequences for returning to the laity after initiation does not come in the form of formal punishment; rather Jain nuns implied that there are spiritual repercussions in the form of negative karma accumulation. If an aspirant for any reason steps back to a normal life, the society at large creates an environment and feeling to the aspirant and the family that they had made the biggest mistake in choosing this decision. The survival of the family and the aspirant within the society becomes almost impossible. Fearing this issue, parents are reluctant to grant permission. I have examples showing parents after a year or two grant permission, but there are parents who never grant permission, without which a potential aspirant instead leads a normal *sharvak* or *shravika* life. Having said this, it is also important to explain that none of the aspirants is forced to join the ascetic order. As Samani Unnata Pragma (2015) said,

Apart from the [aspirants'] written consent from before joining the institute as *mumukshus*, the family has to give written consent of their approval for *diksha* (initiation); after the written consent, before taking the major vows, oral consent from the family and the aspirant is also a firm rule. When an aspirant declares the aspiration to the Acharya for seeking permission to join the order, the Acharya replies, 'Even now, if your aspiration is not strong or you do not want to join this path you can take time and then come back if you wish to; or if you still wish to lead a life in the world, it is your decision—no compulsion.'

This conversation is just between the Acharya and the aspirant, though the family of the aspirant, and a few monks and nuns may be present. This makes it obvious that it is the aspirant's wish and none is compelled to join this path. During the day of renunciation, too, the Acharya asks in front of thousands of members of the community the same question. But the same question at these different times plays

totally different roles. When asked within the small group of people, it is obvious that it is the aspirant's wish and none is forcing her to join this path. But when asked in front of thousands with the Acharya's whole lineage present on stage, one does feel the pressure to say "yes," for precisely the social stigma attached to walking away from the renunciant life at that late stage of one's preparation. All this statement does is absolve the monastic order from the blame that they force people to renounce. The social pressure is all on the *dikshartha* (one seeking initiation) at that moment.

### **The Special Case of Family Renunciation**

During one interview, several *sadhvis* mentioned the huge renunciation ceremony on November 2013 at Bidasar, a small town near Ladnun. Aspirants were willing to renounce just on the question from Acharya, "Is anyone ready to renounce now?" This question was aimed at the female aspirants and *samanis* (the latter for *sadhvi* initiation). Among the aspirants, a mother and her daughter, a child aspirant, stood up to renounce immediately. When I questioned the *sadhvis* if they thought the child aspirant was ready to renounce immediately or if she stood up because of her mother, they insisted it was her will. But her decision was clearly situational. The social pressure on the child may have hastened her desire to renounce. She would have renounced in the future, that is almost certain, but acceptance at that moment might have been a result of social pressure. Or it may be that she was just as ready to renounce as her mother was. Here, her mother's decision to renounce immediately provided written consent for herself and for the aspirant daughter. Despite declaring that she was not forced to take this decision, this narrative above does show a major

role played by the mother to decide the future of her daughter. Parental and aspirant consent is important to join the order.

The above-cited example is one variant of the special case of “family initiation,” where an entire family decides to renounce the world together. Indian culture and tradition goes in such a way that parents have a say in every decision a child makes, be it schooling, career, job, marriage or whatever. Although the most common scenario is for a child to seek parental permission to renounce, which parents may or may not eventually grant, there is the rare case in which parents decide for their children to become ascetics. In the nineteenth century, for example, under the Terapanth’s fifth Acharya, Jayacharya, within a year or two of the initiation of a monk by the name of Maghvagani, his sister, who became Sadhvi Gulaba, joined the order along with their mother. Gulaba later became the Sadhvi Pramukha (head of nuns). Though her brother was initiated first, the sister and mother were initiated together at a later date because of Gulaba’s age (Sadhvi Kalpalata 2011). In recent years, Sadhvi Pulkit Prabha and Sadhvi Vishal Prabha, mother and daughter, were initiated together. Sadhvi Vishal Prabha’s siblings, Muni Vivek and Sadhvi Himanshu Prabha, were also initiated on the same day.<sup>45</sup> But there are also other examples in which a nuclear family initiation occurred on the same day, such as the case of Muni Ajay Prakash, Sadhvi Nitiprabha and Sadhvi Tanmaya Prabha, a father, mother and daughter. Thus we can see cases of nuclear families joining the order and, somewhat

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<sup>45</sup> Though these joint initiations did not happen on the same day, the entire family is now part of the mendicancy. Sadhvi Pulkit Prabha and Sadhvi Vishal Prabha were initiated in 2013 at Bidasar. Muni Vivek and Sadhvi Himanshuprabha were initiated in 2012 at Panchpada.



more commonly, siblings taking initiation together, or one parent will initiate with one child while the remaining family members stay in lay life.

These examples bring to light that apart from the spark of spiritual calling of an aspirant, there do exist social motives for a child to be initiated into the order. The above mentioned examples make it obvious that child initiation may proceed either out of the child's own spiritual interest to renounce, or the less positive scenario that the child is urged to renounce by parents who may be stuck within the world and are attempting to find a better future for their children. Sometimes parents decide to have the whole family renounce for varying reasons including to extract themselves from some worldly situation, perhaps to avoid debt or another threatening situation, but also from the genuineness of collective religious sentiment.

Though children would be cared for in a different way than an adult would be, the essence remains the same: all must follow the same great vows. When a child *sadhu* or *sadhvi* is greeted after *diksha*, regardless of the age of the lay person, the former relation they held with the ascetic—grandmother or mother, father or brother—no longer applies; no touching of those of the opposite sex is permitted. By this I mean even a 12-year-old *sadhu* can no longer get the care and love from his mother and sister and vice versa. This is a public display of a child's strength and dedication to the Jain renunciant ideal. The aspirant is no longer a *shravika*, a kid, sister, or mother, but an ascetic, a complete symbol of the Jain transcendental ideal. The challenge to join the ascetic order is not only a challenge for the aspirant but also for the family of the aspirant, because along with the rules that are laid down for the ascetics, a few become mandatory for the family.

I experienced this in Kathmandu. Parents of the *sadhus* and *sadhvis* were really worried about the ascetics' wellbeing, fearing losing them in the earthquake. Yet they could only wish for their wellbeing; they could not hug or cuddle or take them back to the safe zone via any vehicle, as they no longer belonged to their family. On deciding to follow the monastic order, all aspirants before leaving their home recite key Jain prayers and devotionals in the doorway to symbolize a transfer of trust and devotion from the network of a layperson to that of an ascetic. The doorway in this ritual represents the edge, the border separating the worldly from the transcendent. As the aspirants will no longer have the protection, security and safety of their parents, they now seek these attributes and place their trust in the Jain renunciant *sangha*. They will now depend on the Acharya and fellow ascetics to support and nurture their wellbeing.

### **Training of Child Aspirants**

“Whoever touches the life of the child touches the most sensitive part of a whole which has roots in the most distant past and climbs toward the infinite future.”

- Dr. Maria Montessori

The training period plays a very crucial role in the aspirant's life, which is the doorway leading to a successful ascetic life. The child aspirants appreciate the training and the care given to them by the senior aspirants. When I asked the child aspirants, “What do they like the most at PSS?” they replied,

Mumukshu Preksha: The care which we as kids are given from here is immense. Let it be elder sisters or samaniji or sadhvis. The way they guide us and make sure that wherever we went wrong we are corrected and do not repeat the mistake (Mumukshu Preksha, 2015).

Mumukshu Garima: We all come from different backgrounds, different educational qualifications; after coming here we are made to continue our education at the nearby school. The stress on education is more prioritized here. If we have any clarification or help on our school assignments and education, *mumukshu* sisters are ready to help us any time (Mumukshu Garima, 2015).

Komal: What kind of education are you given? Spiritual or the normal school education that you received when you were home?

Mumukshu Kalpana: We get both kinds of education. We have our school timings. During that time we go to school and learn the basic education that we left behind. And when we are back we have timing, during that time we are supposed to learn all those necessary *kanthastha* (recitation of verses) (Mumukshu Kalpana, 2015).

Mumukshu Manisha: To be precise, apart from the normal and spiritual education we are also are taught how to behave, how to talk, how to walk, how to sleep. In short we are guided each and every way (Mumukshu Manisha, 2015).

Komal: How challenging is it to live a restricted life in a school where you see your friends having some fun, but as a *mumukshu* you are not supposed to?

Mumukshu Puja: We all go to the same school. If we are in same class we make sure we sit together, and if we are not in same class we make new friends. It's not like we don't crack jokes, or don't have fun. In fact we don't find any difference from the other students. Teachers call us as best students in all terms, which in fact makes us feel proud (Mumukshu Puja, 2015).

These were the voices of child aspirants; when I asked the senior *mumukshus*, they often say that they renounced because of *vairagya*, but then upon arriving at PSS, find that they are once again “in the world” because they are expected to raise their juniors. Children want to express their views, and if they are not answered they feel bored and unnoticed. It is quite interesting to note the way in which these kids are trained at the PSS. Different kids come from different environments. As children need more attention, understanding and clarity in depth than a senior, the time spent in making children understand is time-consuming. The seniors who are held responsible

for these children, find very less time for their own spiritual growth for which they actually decided to renounce. One senior aspirant confessed, saying, “It is better for an aspirant to gain some maturity and then join the institute or congregation.” Time plays a very crucial role in the life of an aspirant, as an aspirant feels every second one is binding karma, negative or positive, and if the aspirant spends most of the time raising the juniors rather than on her own spiritual development, she is again stuck “in the world.” Children need to be cautioned again and again on the mistakes they make. Here, we see the rhetoric of *vairagya* in tension with being part of a community once again, a community of *mumukshus* that will one day be a community of renouncers.

### **Child Aspirants’ Awareness of How to Lead a Disciplined Life**

While observing the *bal-sadhvis* in Nepal one day, I saw that while most of them were engrossed in their routine, one *bal-sadhvi* was being really playful; her behavior created tension among the other ascetics. In spite of other ascetics warning her and asking her to study, her mind was always occupied in learning about the earthquake. She could not concentrate on the task assigned to her. Senior *sadhvis* did confess that a certain “maturity level is a must for an ascetic and an aspirant.” This statement when made was accompanied by tension in their faces. The child ascetics and aspirants were being warned and measures were taken to correct them. On one day of reciting vows to the guru,<sup>46</sup> while the Acharya (2015) was addressing the crowd, he said,

An Ascetic should know his/her rules and must follow them as an ascetic. *Bal-sadhu* when they wander by foot, should not talk, should

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<sup>46</sup> This day is called *Hagri vachan*; it occurs every 15 days, on every 15<sup>th</sup> day of the dark and bright fortnights of each month. They review the code of conduct followed by mendicants.

not have competition on who reaches the destination first, should not be playful. A *bal-sadhu* may be playful but must know that he is now an ascetic. If this mistake is repeated, they should be warned by senior monks and make sure they do not repeat it.<sup>47</sup>

Though this statement seems to be harsh, the way the Acharya presented it was really easily acceptable for the young sadhus. It was not taken as harsh. This symbolizes that the way one speaks is also equally important in the ascetic life. Similarly, *bal-sadhvis* were generally guided and addressed in a very polite way, though if they really do not understand on repeated warnings, then strict steps are taken. They would be asked to perform penance as a punishment in order to make them realize how an ascetic should live.

There was a similar scenario in Ladnun, where three *samanis* reside at the PSS to take care of every move of the aspirants. Every day after *Arhat Vandana*, the aspirants are advised on the way to live life. The rules and regulations are repeated every day, especially to the younger aspirants, so that they become aware of every move they make. Generally, after *Arhat Vandana* for 5-10 minutes I never knew who was doing what. And it was at that time one evening that the head of the *mumukshus* made an announcement of a small meeting of all *mumukshus* other than the kids. All gathered at the same place where they were standing.

Head of *mumukshus*: Today in the computer lab, I found a piece of newspaper torn and just left unnoticed by all *mumukshu* sisters. This piece of newspaper was torn from today's newspaper and this newspaper was read by Samaniji. Today in computer lab many *mumukshu* sisters walked by, [but] none took the effort to inform this nor to dump it in dustbin, nor to know who did this mischievous thing. Make sure none repeats this mistake again. If anyone from here has

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<sup>47</sup> "Irya samiti ka dhyān rakhna chahiye, Bal sadhu jab vihar karte hai, tab batein, masti aur competition nahi rakhni chahiye ki kaun pehle ayega. Bal sadhu ho chanchalta hoti hai, parantu ab ek sadhu ki tarah jeena hai. Agar bal sadhu yeah galti dohraye, toh unko sahi aur galat ka dhyān dilya jaya."

done this please stand and confess it or else make sure this is not repeated in future (Mumukshu Hetal, 2015).

I was just observing the way she was handling the situation. A *mumukshu* was held responsible for carelessness by the *samani*. Though she was not the one who committed the original offense, she held herself responsible and the way the head of *mumukshus* reacted, her speech, the understanding, the kindness, just symbolizes the ideal example of tolerance and the way in which situations can be handled or should be handled. It was quite obvious that kids did it, but none had proof and none wanted to hold them responsible. They were ready to take the blame themselves. It is interesting to note that though all knew the child aspirants did it, they were not included in the meeting and the seniors were held responsible. This can be viewed as emphasizing the responsibility and awareness of the senior aspirants, or as going easy on the innocence of child aspirants, as well as creating more awareness of how to handle such situations. During certain situations you know you are not to be blamed but you cannot prove it, nor would you want to; you should just listen. Though this situation can be analyzed in different ways, the manner of the senior aspirant throughout the situation demonstrated her leadership skills.

### **Challenges and Transformation of Child Aspirants**

Children come from different environments; some grasp lessons quickly and some do not understand in spite of repeated explanations. Conversely, with the requirements placed on each aspirant to train her juniors, the leaders and management of the PSS must also address and manage the individual needs and requirements of individual aspirants. They do this by managing the aspirants' understanding of what it means to

be an ascetic. When *mumukshus* act in an inappropriate or disruptive manner to their peers, they are directed to accept certain privations in their lives as part and parcel of being an ascetic. They may even be threatened with expulsion if inappropriate behavior is repeated often. Whether one has lived in the monastic order for years or is a newly-ordained nun or monk, if an ascetic makes the same mistake repeatedly, corrective measures are taken by senior mendicants to make sure the mistake is not repeated. However, the rules and regulations for a child aspirant varied somewhat from that of a senior aspirant. I asked a 14-year-old *mumukshu* about her initial experiences at the PSS:

Komal: What was your biggest challenge when first joining the order?

Mumukshu Pragya: Waking up early in the morning and continuing your day is biggest challenge.

Komal: So do you still have that challenge? Did you overcome it? How did PSS help you in this issue?

Mumukshu Pragya: I had this when I initially joined this institute. Now I have overcome this with daily practice, because when I see my co-aspirants waking up it gives me motivation to do the same. PSS was lenient in letting me wake up a little late, but with time I realised I have to stay focused and abide by rules and regulations (Mumukshu Pragya, 2015).

Waking up in the early hours is a habit spanning various religious traditions. In Jainism, as in Hinduism, not only are the early hours considered an auspicious time, but they also represent an efficient use of time. Jain renunciants spend six hours of their day in slumber. The other eighteen hours are dedicated to spiritual development. The sooner one is to rise and prepare for the shedding of their material identity, the sooner they can dedicate the rest of their lives to spiritual liberation.

Other aspirants related other challenges they continue to face about their training:

Mumukshu Anupreksha: Washing clothes is still a challenge for me. I never washed my clothes when I was at home. Here I have to wash them myself.

Komal: Did they teach you how to wash them? How do you manage that now?

Mumukshu Anupreksha: Yes, they taught me how to wash them. (All other *mumukshus* started laughing as she was explaining. I asked why they were all laughing.) In a day I just wash one piece of my dress. Say today I wash my duppatta, tomorrow my pants and so [on] (Mumukshu Anupreksha, 2015).

(All *mumukshus* laugh and have fun at her innocence.)

Mumukshu Shruti: For me the biggest challenge is to organize my things and keep my place neat. My study table in spite of organizing my books and other stuff, it still remains unorganized. As a *mumukshu* I should keep all of that neat and tidy. I am overcoming it but it's still a challenge (Mumukshu Shruti, 2015).

Komal: All others did not have any other challenge?

The others responded "No."

Komal: What about food? Don't you wish to eat chocolates or ice-creams or sodas or anything?

Mumukshus in collective: We don't wish to have any but even if we desire, they make sure that it is arranged for us soon. But we make sure we don't be adamant.

Komal: What do you do for entertainment? Don't you get bored? (I did not even finish the question, a notorious *mumukshu* starts giggling with another who sat beside her.)

Mumukshu Puja: When we are feeling bored we play games; we in fact never get bored (Mumukshu Puja, 2015).

Mumukshu Manisha: In our free time we sing songs, (at times we even sing movie songs), we read books, play any indoor games, and time just whiles away. Since we have our school routine, we basically don't feel bored or get free time as such (Mumukshu Manisha, 2015).



Child aspirants upon joining the institute were given a sense of understanding that dreaming of becoming an ascetic is totally different from living a life as an ascetic. None were unaware of the fact that all these were the hardships that they would have to face as an ascetic. And the best thing was they knew it is challenging but they were ready to accept it with that sweet little smile their faces carried all the time. It is very important to keep a child occupied while letting them live their lives happily.

As a part of PSS training every year during the summer, the institute gives the aspirants a month holiday, during which they are sent home to practice a life as a *mumukshu* at the homes where they were once *shravikas*. I asked,

Komal: How different is it to go home on a month vacation. In the same house you had lived a life differently and now you would live a life like a *mumukshu* How challenging was it? Is there any change in your family since you joined the PSS?

Mumukshu Pragya: First time when I went home for vacation, my entire house was changed. I was shocked and asked when did you change the house?

(All *mumukshu* sisters laughed loudly, including her.)

Komal: I am not asking about the physical appearance. I am asking about any change in behavior, living style, thought process?

Mumukshu Pragya: My parents used to have *jamikand* (root vegetables), but they make sure when we (pointing to her cousin-sister) are home they don't eat them. Even if my dad wishes to eat, my mom restricts him and says, 'Learn from Pragya' (Mumukshu Pragya, 2015).

Mumukshu Anupreksha: My father used to teach Jain principles occasionally, but after me joining PSS he does it on a routine (Mumukshu Anupreksha, 2015).

Mumukshu Anchal: My parents are more into *tapas* (austerities, penance) (Mumukshu Anchal, 2015).

Mumukshu Garima: Once a year they do *Gurudarshan* (have an audience with the Acharya) (Mumukshu Garima, 2015).

Komal: (Pointing to one *mumukshu*) Why are you silent?

Mumukshu Shruti: My mom believes a lot in idol worship. I am not against her choice of worship but she forces me to do the same when I go back home. Once I said to her, 'Mom please do not force me; for me God doesn't exist,' and on hearing this she got furious and warned me to never say this. From then on she wants me to accompany her to temple. I accompany her till the gate and once she enters the temple I either wait outside or go for a walk until she comes back from temple. Later I realized, making my presence at temple I can make my mom happy and myself by just chanting the mantra or any *kanthastha* that I was taught at PSS (Mumukshu Shruti, 2015).

The understanding of child aspirants does show the way they are trained and the maturity level they develop. One could easily tell from the first conversation with them which child aspirant has matured and which have not. The PSS had to make sure that when a child is all set to renounce the world, the kid should never get the feeling in life that they were never shown reality. As a part of the institutionalized training at the PSS, one day the *mumukshu* sisters visit the playgrounds where young kids play outdoors on swings, seesaws, climbing the bricks, etc. Though the institution expects aspirants to follow the rules and regulations laid down for them, it also organizes a day out occasionally. This, is a crucial test of spiritual training; from the congregation. In a way they intimate to the young kids: this is the life you have left behind and you will no longer get a chance to play such outdoor games once you renounce. If you still want to live in this world, you are still a free bird to fly back home. It is upon the aspirant to choose between the two. The training provided by the PSS allows one to see the differences between wanting to be an ascetic, feeling *vairagya*, and actually living as an ascetic. The practical training aspirants get at the PSS disciplines them into the ascetic life as it is established in the Terapanth. This is the difference between general desire and specific life. As I desired to get a Master's

degree from United States, the training I received in the USA and India were quite different from one another and each shaped me into a different kind of scholar. Had I stayed in India for my Master's, I am sure I would have written a different thesis and been cultivated to think about different issues. I imagine this is similar to the difference between being a Tapa Gacch *sadhvi* and a Terapanthi *sadhvi*. The PSS makes sure the aspirants understand just how different life is going to be, even stricter as an ascetic in comparison to the PSS. Training is just an idea of a life ahead; there is always more to show about the ascetic life. Training helps them to have a prepared mindset and an understanding the difference between “what is” and “what it is to be” and in this way the rules and regulations are framed.

### **Rules and Regulations for Child Aspirants**

The rules and regulations laid down for the aspirants have changed over the years to address problems and issues that frequently arose. Some changes sought to clarify expectations, while others addressed the need to standardize certain practices. Such examples include the implementation of the dress code, the creation of the formalized education system, and organized eating and sleeping habits discussed in Chapter 1. This form of institutionalized training is vital to the Terapanth sect, as it accepts great responsibility for preparing aspirants to become nuns. Challenges were not just for the aspirants, but from the widest viewpoint it was a challenge for the whole congregation, the institute and even for the families of the aspirants, because the rules and regulations were new for them, too. The recent challenge is the training to be given to the kids who come as aspirants. The training given to the adult aspirants is different from that of the kids. There are several ways the PSS differentiates between

an adult and a child aspirant; one way is the dress code. Child aspirants, until they turn 16, wear *salwar kameez*,<sup>48</sup> consisting of a *pajama* (pant) which is loose-fitting, a *kurta* (top) with sleeves extending to the elbow, a collared high neck which gives a tailored fit, covered with a neatly platted *dupatta* which stands over a safety pin attached to the *kurta*. The *mumukshus* wear saris with a thin line of embroidered design on it. I asked the child aspirants what role the specific form of dress plays in their lives:

Komal: Would you prefer to wear a sari or *salwar kameez*?

Mumukshu Manisha: Sari.

Komal: Sari? But why? How will you manage to wear it while doing daily things?

Mumukshu Anupreksha: Dress really makes a difference. With *salwar kameez*, neither do we feel responsible nor are we given any major responsibilities. In *salwar kameez* we are still considered kids (Mumukshu Anupreksha, 2015).

Komal: But you go to school. How do you feel when your friends come in colored uniforms? Do you wish to have such a uniform instead of white?

Mumukshu Pragya: Color doesn't make any difference; instead white is a color that has all colors in it. To be frank we don't like your dress. (All the *mumukshu* started laughing) (Mumukshu Pragya, 2015).

Komal: (Laughing) But why!? What's wrong with my dress?

Mumukshu Garima: Nothing is wrong in your dress, but the simplicity and peace you find in white color you wouldn't find in any other color (Mumukshu Garima, 2015).

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<sup>48</sup> All aspirants initially wore saris upon arriving at the PSS as aspirants. Since 2010-2011, aspirants who join for the first year should wear *salwar kameez* as a uniform and from second year they can wear a sari. But if the aspirant is a child, then the aspirant wears *salwar kameez* as her uniform until she turns 16. This difference in dress code was brought into practice because the aspirants were too young to handle sari. And child aspirants had to attend the school. During school time having sari as school uniform gets difficult to handle.

This gives me the feeling that these *mumukshus* wanted to look exactly as a *sadhvi* looks. Sethi (2012, 64) identifies clothing as one of the three markers that distinguish Jain female renunciants from Jain laywomen. Jain female renunciants wear all-white *khadi* (Indian spun cotton) cloth woven into various forms of saris including a blouse and shawl. Terapanthi *samanis* wear a sari that is much longer in length, reaching to their ankles. Terapanthi *sadhvis*' garb has multiple pleats that tend to cover half of their waist reaching to an inch or two above the ankles. They also have a *sari* that adds a layer from the back of their waist down to the ankles and then folded over and up to also act as a shawl. The sari is a symbol of attachment, as the woman has not reduced her possessions to the bare minimum. The most important factor of Jain female renunciants' clothing is the color. Their clothing is all white symbolizing their purity. The purity white evokes extends down to the most novice of Jain nuns.

Upon the *mumukshus*' explanations about dress, I decided to wear white clothes. But then I had to pause in my decision, because in India if we wear it for a long time it is a symbol that I am an aspirant. And then to wear colored clothes later would symbolize that I am no longer an aspirant, which actually would create a tension in my professional and personal life. I do agree it does not matter what the world thinks, but a few laypersons would get curious enough to ask me if I would join the monastic order like my sister. This further confirms Sethi's argument that the clothing of Jain renunciants is an important discriminating factor. Upon changing into her dress, a *mumukshu* symbolizes her decision to finalize the departure from the material world, from parents, friends and her biological home. She begins the symbolic ritual of detachment and *aparigraha*. Or rather, she is symbolically marking

detachment through ritualized forms of dress. In a sense, a *mumukshu*'s discipline is that of ritualizing her life. This transformation happens slowly, through disciplining oneself to the monastic rules. The PSS is an institutionalized avenue for cultivating this discipline.

## **Conclusion**

Though it was hard for me to accept the idea of renunciation in this automated world, to live a life selflessly in this selfish world, I do agree with the idea of spreading the teachings of Jainism to the younger kids or, to be precise, this generation of kids.

Child ascetics are role models and are central to the recruitment of future monastic leaders, hence proving to be essential for the continued existence of ascetics within the congregation. As we look to the future of the generation yet to come, it is important to show that being modern does not mean just being connected with technology. If that were the case, then how did Acharya Tulsi spread such a revolutionary message?

Though there are some legal concerns with *bal-diksha*, the importance of child aspirants for the congregation is clear in the advantage for the Terapanth, as former child aspirants lead the congregation today. Having a look into the PSS training given to kids, it is obvious that no child is impoverished, kept away from reality, nor from basic necessities. A child who wishes to renounce is not only proceeding based on her own interest, but also from the spark of the spiritual call arising from good karmas.

Child ascetics, apart from being the responsibility of their more senior co-aspirants, still represent the Jain ascetic ideal to the community. In the "world," responsibility for raising young children is often assigned to older sisters, cousins,

etc. of the same generation. Thus, it appears to be an unexamined aspect of Indian culture's thinking about girls and young women as caretakers on the part of senior ascetics in the Terapanth that has led them to simply assume that older aspirants at the PSS would be content to raise and train their juniors, perhaps seeing it as part of their *sadhana* (religious training). It is possible that assigning to elder *mumukshus* the task of raising their juniors is a strategy senior ascetics use as a practical way to teach aspirants to be humble, thus overcoming their individuality. By having them do something they may not wish to do, the senior ascetics may be aware that aspirants frequently see this as a worldly activity of the kind they thought they had left behind, and use it as a method of training. However, though *bal-diksha* is important to the future of the community, it is also important to listen to the issues raised by ascetics and elder aspirants when it comes to how young aspirants are raised in the PSS, especially in regard to how caring for them may hinder elder *mumukshus*' educational and spiritual progress. It may also deter girls and young women from joining the PSS, knowing that this will be expected of them. Perhaps by implementing separate facilities and curricula for younger aspirants under the care of senior ascetics such as *sadhvis* and *samanis*, elder *mumukshus* will have more time to focus on their own progress. It may also force the Terapanthi ascetic order to rethink the desirability of permitting young children to become aspirants.

## Conclusion

My research emphasizes the importance of both discursive and performative constructions of gender and renunciation amongst Jain female renouncers through analyses of their personal narratives and ritual performances in the crafting of renunciant subjectivities and identities.

The journey from Acharya Tulsi's idea of the institute to forming the PSS and having it survive until today, producing a large number of female ascetics of great value to the congregation, was not simple or easy. Joining this institute is not a guarantee that an aspirant will join the monastic order. Though the motto of the institute is "education before renunciation," the narratives of Jain female aspirants point to the institute as a test for an aspirant to know clearly how capable she is to fit into the monastic order. If during the training, the aspirant or the institute feels that the aspirant cannot lead life as an ascetic for any reason, they are sent back home. The challenges and struggles faced and still being faced by the PSS have been immense, showing the dedication of the entire congregation to make this dream come true.

It is true that ascetics and laity must have good communication with each other to lead a good and peaceful life. The PSS shows that with the blessings of the Acharya and the support of the laity, Tulsi's dream of producing educated female ascetics for the congregation has been successful. The PSS allows the aspirant to understand the Three Jewels the importance of the five great vows. As I showed in Chapter 1, the pedagogy works on a chain of understanding; it nurtures the aspirants by giving them a platform to practice being disciplined *sadhvis*. Though most of the scriptural studies are still done after joining the monastic order, the practical training



to lead a disciplined ascetic life proves to be vital to teaching this generation how to live a monastic life. This institute makes the aspirant understand that, although they are leading a path of spiritual growth, which is a journey of the self, they still have to live in a world of ascetics who bear the responsibility both to discipline their juniors and to lead the whole Terapanthi congregation.

Chapter 2 also examines the role of karma in an aspirant's life. We see that they interpret karma with special attention to the details of its metaphysical underpinnings. The interplay of deluding karma, painful karma, obstacle-bearing karma and knowledge-obscuring karma in the personal journeys of aspirants is crucial to how they understand the concept of karma, much more than textual knowledge of it. Jain female renouncers also draw upon the discourses of karma—especially concerning the need to make use of this life for spiritual pursuits in light of realizing their own mortality—to create and legitimate their constructions of renunciation in a patriarchal Indian society.

Merely stating the four reasons for Jain female renouncers' to seek the religious life—realizing one's mortality, avoiding marriage, making the most of one's life, and witnessing the initiation of someone close to them—does not suffice. Instead, Jain nuns and nuns-in-training construct their renunciation narratives through use of dominant Jain discourses of *vairagya* and interweave it with their personal life experiences. By examining the various reasons to renounce the world as an aspirant, death served as a means to question a person's life purpose.

Chapter 3 inspects the female personality connected with sexuality, rebirth, passing, agony and enduring to see how competitors develop a female character that

typically has coin in the life of a Jain sadhvi. Sexual orientation never leaves, and the ladies themselves remember this. Female aspirants should totally deconstruct and demolish any ideas of her common, female character connected with the world to start their preparation. Feminism is re-imagined and put at the level of the typical, which challenges the idea of ladies as synonymous with materiality. In the meantime, the typical gendering of Jain female renunciant subjectivities shows the at last deceptive nature of sexual orientation, additionally its social pertinence—sex remains socially however not basically significant to Jain female renunciation.

Examining the reasons for not having a PSS for male aspirants, the standard answer is that the small number of males entering the monastic order would make such an institute stand idle much of the time. However, at least some of the young male monks envied the women their organized education in the PSS. Despite the fact that female ascetics being better educated than male ascetics because of decades of PSS training, males are prioritized over females in a variety of ways. It has been traditional that males play the role of decision-making authority. We can very well see this in monastic order. The Acharya must be male, nuns defer to monks regardless of seniority, and the laity has more respect for monks than nuns, even in terms of giving sermons based on knowledge of the tradition, in which the nuns are better versed. Nuns do not want to play the role of Acharya; women cannot make some decisions, by which I mean in certain situations women tend to behave more emotionally than required to make clear decisions. Nuns at present accept this priority for males and would view any demand for more respect as possessive, and yet suspect that if this situation continues (that there are many more, better educated nuns than

monks), that priority for males will eventually be challenged, if not by the nuns, then by the laity, and perhaps even by the Acharya.

One of my central questions in this research is how *mumukshus* negotiate the differences between the rhetoric of renunciation, which tends to couch seeking liberation as an individual endeavour, and the practicalities of the day to day life of a *mumukshu*, in which their training—especially their charge to train their juniors—reinforces mutual interdependence. Since senior monks mentor male aspirants on a one-to-one basis, I questioned which the better system was. Male aspirants had better access to the Acharya, more individual access to senior ascetics, and shorter times in training before renunciation, but were less well educated than the women.

Chapter 4 explored the issue of child initiation and the tensions that arise due to the fact that the elder aspirants play a significant role in raising the child aspirants in the PSS. The feeling of *vairagya* in the aspirant is seen as more important to the decision to renounce than the age of the aspirant, because the desire to renounce is not a karmic call of this birth but the collective result of all previous births' positive karmic calls. Though the training of child aspirants causes some tension among some other *mumukshus* who would like more time for their own spiritual development, investigation showed that the decision of most child aspirants seemed serious and personal, and current history demonstrates the value of *baldiksha* in that child aspirants are more likely than others to rise to the highest leadership positions. At the same time, senior aspirants and even some *sadhvis* and *samanis* believe that younger aspirants must have a sufficient maturity level to understand what renunciation is, which is needed in the case of child aspirants.

Jain aspirants are in this way anticipated that would exemplify both manly attributes of renunciation and female characteristics of family life. Jain ladies deconstruct their common personalities for a renunciate character that adjusts to the prerequisites for the quest for moksha through the execution of their flawless shil yet still keeps up their female nature. As exhibited here, Jain female renouncers not just develop their ways of life as Jain renunciants to enter the manly gendered space of Jain renunciation, however through a few practices, exhibitions and developments happening over a dynamic range of encounters, they change themselves as they epitomize the most noteworthy standards of the convention. The lives of Jain nuns supply an option vision of what renunciation is and how it is lived from the overwhelming manly models. By going into what is regularly seen as a manly religious space and part, to be specific administration of the group, Jain female renouncers are feminizing what Jain renunciation is about. Jain sadhvis, samanīs, and mumukshus are more than basically religious ladies or pure, righteous ladies. They are living holy people of Jainism symbolizing the perfect lifestyle for all Jains, female and male alike.

The activities of *samaṇs* and *samanīs* among Jains outside of India mean that the Terapanthis' influence is increasing rapidly within the Jain diaspora. The idea of the *saman* tradition has definitely given a new twist to the tale of the Terapanth and the Jain tradition as a whole. However, since March 2013, there have been no new *samani* initiations. The reason for this is unknown. Most probably, the *samani* initiation will continue, but no one knows what the Acharya has decided. The decline of the *samani* order would not necessarily hamper the PSS or reverse the advances

made in women's education within the renouncer order. As every Terapanthi female aspirant trains at the PSS before joining the order, whether they become a *samani* or a *sadhvi*, education remains a major part of Terapanthi female ascetic training. Whether the *samani* tradition will continue or not is a topic for future research. Having said that, in spite of female ascetics' knowledge acumen, gender differences would continue. The simple and foremost reason being the abiding the guidance of the Acharya, who will always be a male. Though nuns do play roles as leaders, their leadership is confined to the nun lineage; the highest decision-making authority is the Acharya. It will be in the hands of the younger generation, as they become the directors of the play, to direct our ancestors' traditions into making us who we are and what we will be.

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