

Contemporary Jain *Satī*-Narratives

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Drawing from interviews with Jain nuns in India, Sherry Fohr explores a traditional—yet continually expanding—narrative tradition that links chastity to supernatural power.

Genre of the *Satī*-Narrative in India & the Power of Chastity

Frequently a character in a South Asian narrative will tell a story to another character, and this story may contain another character telling yet another story. In this way, stories are embedded in stories, which themselves are embedded in other stories. Jain narratives are not exceptions to this rhetorical mode. Moreover, Jain nuns' lives are stories in and of themselves; and their lives include telling stories when they preach to the laity.¹ Much of my research in India has centered on learning Jain narratives about women—from nuns (*sādhvīs* or *āryikās*) of almost every sect and sub-sect of Jainism—and learning how these women have interpreted these stories.

The stories that Jain nuns wanted to tell me most often were about *satīs* (virtuous women), also referred to as *mahāsatis* (great virtuous women); they also related these narratives to their own experiences and lives as Jain nuns. *Satī*-narratives are told in ancient and medieval Jain texts and are among the most popular and widely known of Jain literature among renouncers and laity in both of the main Jain sects, Śvetāmbar and Digambar.² In Hinduism, the term *satī* is most often used to denote a faithful wife (also called a *pativrata*)—and in some contexts refers to the ritual burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband; but, in Jainism, the term refers to a “virtuous woman” who is either a faithful wife or female renouncer. Most Jain *satī*-narratives are about faithful wives who eventually renounce in order to become nuns. Although the main parts of these narratives are about “virtuous women”—women who, while married, have remained faithful to their husbands, sometimes in the face of great hardships or potential rapists—nuns described them as inspirations for their own celibacy

after renouncing such householder lives. Some of these narratives are shared with Hinduism—such as those about Sītā, Kuntī, Damayantī, and Draupadī—but, unlike their Hindu counterparts, end with the heroine renouncing. However, the *satī*-narratives about Candanabālā, Rājīmatī, Brāhmī, Sundarī, Subhadrā, Mainasundarī, Puṣpacūlā, Prabhāvatī, Śivā, Śīlavatī, Sulasā, Cellnā, Anjanā, Madanarekhā, Mṛgavatī, and Padmāvatī are unique to the Jain tradition.³

As Jain nuns told me many times, stories about *satīs* are not just stories; they are considered to be historical events about Jain women of the past. To many Jains, these *satīs* are as real as the nun-*satīs* with whom I conversed on a daily basis during my fieldwork in India. A few of these nuns have become quite influential and famous in various Jain communities. And, when this happens, someone or some group within the Jain community writes their hagiography—their life-story—which refers to important or pivotal events in their lives and how they taught and lived the Jain tradition.⁴ However, a renouncer does not need to be famous for her or his story to be told. Some nuns and laypeople told me about their gurus' lives and how their gurus inspired them. This storytelling process augments the *satī*-narrative tradition so that the number of *satīs* within this tradition is always increasing to include those who are still alive or who have died only recently.

However, I noticed a discrepancy between narratives about *satīs* in Jain history and the lives of *satīs* living now. Jain nuns repeatedly told me narratives about *satīs* of the past that ascribe miraculous power to these virtuous women. For example, Satī Damayantī was able to save a merchant from a band of thieves and convert a demon to nonviolence, and Satī Anjanā was able to crack a boulder in two. Nuns told me that these *satīs* were powerful because chastity, as either a wife or a renouncer, produces supernatural power. Wives in these narratives are powerful because they limit their sexuality to their husbands, they said; and nuns are even more powerful because their sexuality is completely proscribed. Various nuns described the process of accumulating power through chastity in different ways, but most described it as amassing internal power (*ātmaśakti*, *urjā*, *tejas*, or *tapasyā*), which the sexual activity of both men and women jettisons.⁵ This discourse is remarkably non-gendered: the Hindu discourse concerning this same subject is obviously male gendered, as it links the power of celibacy to the retention of semen.⁶ Although the heroines of the *satī*-narratives are often able to accomplish miracles because of their supernatural power, I witnessed no miraculous events connected to powerfully chaste women during my travels in India; and I rarely heard about such events happening in the present. I therefore began to ask whether nuns knew of any miraculous events occurring now.

Some nuns were simply unable to think of any. Sometimes I was told that chastity does not produce as much power now because of the impurity of modern times in this degenerate age. Nuns told me that the atmosphere is less pure, the air is polluted, and the food that monks and nuns acquire from the laity is also less pure. As a result, people cannot become as powerful as they could in the past.⁷ However, nuns of the Terāpanthī sub-sect of the Śvetāmbar sect and nuns in the Digambar sect were forthcoming with stories about modern-day miracles connected with chastity.

Contemporary Terāpanthī Heroines

I interviewed many nuns while I was at the Terāpanthī *āśram* in Ladnun, Rajasthan, in 1999. Rajasthani Sādhvī Jinaprabhā Śrī Jī, an older, extremely erudite nun, was among them. She told me the story of Satī Subhadrā and then proceeded to explain how nuns experience the power of chastity in their lives today. Satī Subhadrā's virtuous character is first slandered and then finally proved in this narrative.⁸ This theme of suspicion and proof is also shared by a few other *satī*-narratives; and at least one Rajasthani Śvetāmbar nun told me that stories like these reflect some men's "paranoia" about their wives' and daughters' chastity. In these narratives, the *satī*'s husband or in-laws usually suspect her of infidelity, but they ultimately realize their mistake in the end.

In Satī Subhadrā's narrative, her virtue was questioned and then proved by a miracle (*camatkār*). The following is a condensed version of this narrative as it was told to me by Sādhvī Jinaprabhā Śrī Jī:

Satī Subhadrā was from the city of Campapur in Bihar, which is now called Bhogalpur. From a very young age, she had such a strong tendency toward *brahmacarya* [chastity] that everyone honored her. Even the *devatās* [gods] bowed to her feet. When it came time for her to marry, she decided that she would marry only a Jain. However, she was very beautiful, and one day a Buddhist boy happened to see her, became completely infatuated, and decided to marry her. He knew that she would marry only a Jain and so he learned enough about the Jain religion to mislead her. It was only after they were married that Subhadrā realized the ruse. She was unhappy, but what could she do? This union is what destiny had brought her. Her in-laws wanted her to become a Buddhist like them, but she told them that she would never renounce Jainism. A great deal of tension existed in the house because of this continuing conflict over religion.

This tension reached the breaking point when, one day, a Jain monk arrived at the house for alms. He was a very strict monk and his religious practice was very difficult. He did not try to avoid discomfort in any way. Even if a snake were to have bitten him, he would not have removed it from his body. Subhadrā saw that his eye was irritated; it was very red and watery. Something was in it, but his practice was so strict that he would

not take it out. Instead, he continued to suffer with it. Subhadrā took pity on him and removed it with her tongue;⁹ but when her mother- and sister-in-law saw this, they started to yell, accusing her of having an affair with the Jain monk. A crowd of people gathered, attracted by the slander. Soon the whole village believed that Satī Subhadrā was no *satī* at all.

Subhadrā's in-laws wanted to expel her from the house, but she refused to leave, saying, "I have always been faithful to my husband in body, speech, and mind. I have never even thought of another man, and I will not eat or drink until I am vindicated." She locked herself in a room of the house and started to recite mantras. On the third night, a *dev* [god] appeared to her. After learning about her situation, he went around the town, locking all the town gates. The people of the town tried to open the gates, but to no avail: No one could enter or leave the village.

A man who could speak to *devs* was consulted, and he informed the villagers that only a *satī* would be able to open the gates. He said that when a *satī* drew water from a well—using a thin thread and a sieve—and splashed the water on the gates, then the gates would open. The ruler of the town sent out an announcement that this action should be taken, but no woman in the town could open the gates, not even the ruler's own wives.

When Subhadrā heard what had happened, she asked her mother-in-law for permission to try to open the gates. Her mother-in-law admonished her for her shameful behavior, and although she gave her permission, she did so only in anger. Subhadrā walked to the well with her eyes lowered, while people scoffed and whispered. When she reached the well she said, "As the sun is my witness, as the stars are my witnesses, as the gods are my witnesses, if I am a *satī*, if I have been true in my chastity, may I now open these gates." She drew the water from the well and walked to the first gate and opened it. She did the same for two more gates, but left the fourth closed so that another woman might be able to prove her virtue, if it were questioned.

This story could be interpreted in many ways, including as an attestation to the superiority of Jainism over Buddhism. But such is not the interpretation that Sādhvī Jinaprabhā Śrī Jī offered. After telling the story, she continued our conversation as follows:

"She was so firmly virtuous, she was so firmly chaste, that *devs* [gods] came to serve her. She was so firm, she was such a *satī* that she never even dreamed of leaving her husband and desiring another. . . ."

I asked: "The gods helped Subhadrā. Do you also feel that way? You are also chaste. Do you also feel that the gods help you?"

"Yes, they do. We travel thousands of kilometers. If no one protected us, then how could we do this? Along with your own *śakti* [power], there is also the gods' power. If you are firm in religion and firm in your chastity, then you don't even have to call on the gods. [Also,] Good men are helpful on their own. We don't have to ask for help. We should increase our spiritual strength [*ātma-bal*], so why should we ask for someone to help us? But they come [to help] anyway."

“In other words, the vow of *brahmacarya* [chastity] protects you?” I asked.

“That is because of the *ātma-bal*,” she replied.

“Can you tell me of such an incident?”

“Once we were near Madras. There was a new house built there with doors on both sides. At 10:30 PM, four or five people came. They were drunk or malicious people, or maybe they were thieves—we didn’t know. They started to say, ‘Open the door.’ We said, ‘We will not open the door, we are *sādhus* [holy people] staying here. We will not open the door.’ So they became very angry and started knocking on the door very forcefully. They started to try to open it, but the door did not open. We, who were sitting inside, started to recite mantras. . . .

“We were five nuns. Later they were still not able to open the door. They went up on the roof and searched everywhere for a way to get in; even from the roof there was no way in. They started at 10:30 at night and continued until 4:00 in the morning. They could not open a door anywhere. . . .

“There are many incidents like that one.

“One night, when we were in Maharashtra, we were giving a religious lecture. We were propagating the *aṇuvrats* [lesser vows] and their eleven rules. One of those rules is *brahmacarya*, to be satisfied with your own husband or wife. We explained this rule to them. After the lecture everyone left, but there were some hoodlums who came back that night and tried to break a small window [of the building in which we were staying]. They started talking about *brahmacarya*. They started uttering obscenities and started saying totally dirty things. They said, ‘Come here, we will teach you *brahmacarya*.’ They tried very hard to break that window. It was a very weak window, but it never broke, even though they tried very hard.”

After hearing these stories, I began to reflect about how much more dangerous it must be for nuns than monks to travel across India by foot most of the year, as is common practice, so I asked, “Do you think that life is more dangerous for women than men?”

She replied: “Women can protect themselves so that men can’t do anything. No one can do anything if your mind is strong and you have power. If your mind becomes weak, then someone can do anything.”¹⁰

The Jain laity is often so assiduous about protecting monks and nuns that they accompany groups of renouncers while they travel from village to village in their vicinity. Sādhvī Jinaprabhā Śrī Jī referred to this practice when she told me that “good men are helpful on their own.” However, it is common belief in India that if a woman is chaste, she cannot be violated, even without this protection. Her chastity is her protection. So, while Jain women protect their chastity and Jain laypeople protect nuns, women’s chastity also protects them through the power it produces. This chastity, however, must be practiced in body, speech, and mind. A true *satī* will not engage in unsanctioned sex, talk about it, or even think about it. For married *satīs*, such as Subhadrā, this means not even thinking about another

man, as Subhadrā asserted about herself in the above narrative. For nuns, this means not thinking about sex at all. Sādhvī Jinaprabhā Śrī Jī referred to this at the end of our discussion when she asserted, “No one can do anything if your mind is strong and you have power.”

Supernatural beings who come to the aid of great men and women are common in Jain narratives;¹¹ one came to Subhadrā because of her chastity. However, Sādhvī Jinaprabhā Śrī Jī emphasized that the events that happened near Madras and in Maharashtra demonstrated the power of nuns’ chastity more than anything else. Because of this power, men were not able to break into the buildings where the women were staying. In one case, Sādhvī Jinaprabhā Śrī Jī mentioned that the nuns chanted mantras. However, mantras are considered only as powerful as the those who recite them are chaste. Many nuns told me that if one has enough power stored within, this power charges mantras and other religious practices with great effectiveness. But, without chastity, these same mantras and practices bear no fruit.

Just like the *satī*-narratives, such events concerning present-day *satīs* are told and retold, so other nuns in the Terāpanthī community were familiar with the incidents that Sādhvī Jinaprabhā Śrī Jī narrated. The same is true about events in Digambar Gaṇinī Jñānamatī Mātā Jī’s life, events that also demonstrate the power of chastity.¹²

Digambar Gaṇinī Jñānamatī Mātā Jī

Chastity’s power is not limited to protection, as I learned while staying at Jambūdvīp, a pilgrimage center and *āśram* in Hastinapur, Uttar Pradesh. Digambar Gaṇinī Jñānamatī Mātā Jī, a scholar and author, had founded this *āśram*, where she and her disciples often reside.¹³ Her younger sister, Āryikā Candanamatī Mātā Jī (also a nun), told me about how Jñānamatī Mātā Jī had cured people.

“Once her two brothers became badly ill with smallpox,” she began. “People said ‘Do this,’ ‘Do that,’ ‘Worship the goddess [of smallpox].’ But Mātā Jī said, ‘What can anyone else do about this illness?’ She then told her mother to go worship in the [Jain] temple . . . , and, because of this, her brothers were cured. Even now they are alive. The main cause of this [miracle] is that she is celibate; she is unmarried.”

“Does she cure people with her blessings?” I inquired.

“After marriage, a man and woman become involved. Then the body’s holiness is destroyed. There is great power in celibacy, great power. She has never touched a man, so the *śakti* [power] of her *tapasyā* [austerities] is great. Even during her childhood, she abstained from clarified butter, sugar, and delicacies and ate only very simple foods. Now she eats only once in twenty-four hours and has traveled thirty thousand kilometers by foot all over India. So she has her own power and the power of knowledge. Therefore, her aura has become very powerful. The effect of all this is that

if she touches [someone] with her feather broom and repeats a mantra, that person is cured. There is also great strength in her mantras to cure people.

“Once, she had a sore that was not healing due to a sugar problem [in her body]. When she touched it with her feather broom, medicine was not necessary. It healed all by itself. Once, a scorpion bit someone who was later cured by her mantra. There was no need for medicine. Some of this is due to the devotees’ faith. If they have complete faith in her, they are helped, and their mantra repetition and *tapasyā* have more power. Jñānamatī Mātā Jī’s *tapasyā* and religious conduct have always been extremely strong. Therefore, all seven hundred *munis* [monks] in the Digambar religion agree that there is great power in Jñānamatī Mātā Jī.”

“She is powerful because of her *tapasyā*?” I asked.

“*Tapasyā, brahmacarya, mantras*—all of these united.”¹⁴

Āryikā Candanamatī Mātā Jī told me that Gaṇinī Jñānamatī Mātā Jī’s practice of celibacy produces power in her; and, because she has always been celibate and has never been married (*bal-brahmacarya*), she is especially powerful. Although she emphasized celibacy above all else, Āryikā Candanamatī Mātā Jī’s assertions brought out the complexities of its resulting power in that she mentioned austerities, mantras, and religious conduct. Austerities are also believed to produce power. Many Jain nuns connected austerities and celibacy when they talked with me about the power of celibacy. For some, celibacy was a form of austerity. For others, it was austerity that increased the soul’s power and celibacy that preserved that power. And, for still others, celibacy produced the power needed to tolerate the austerities of the Jain ascetic path. However, in virtually all cases, nuns consider those who have never been sexually active to be the most powerful, because none of their power has been wasted through sexual activity.

Chastity, Power & the Jain Tradition

Most of the *satī*-narratives describe supernaturally powerful women, and Jain nuns of every sect and sub-sect were clear that one of the main sources of this power was chastity, whether in the form of wifely fidelity or ascetic celibacy. Nuns related these stories to their own lives in a variety of ways, and this tradition of powerfully chaste women still persists in the Jain tradition. Although examples of this power are not as spectacular as they are in some of the *satī*-narratives, various Jain nuns argued that this power is still present today by telling me about certain modern-day events that demonstrate this power. The *satī*-narrative tradition is a living and growing tradition. When I asked nuns about how many *satīs* there were in Jain history, a common answer I received was that there were innumerable *satīs*: *satīs* from the past and *satīs* who lived or live in modern times.

Notes

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¹For ways in which renunciators use stories in sermons, see John Cort, “An Overview of the Jaina Purāṇas,” in *Purāṇa Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts*, ed. Wendy Doniger (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 185–206: 202–4.

²See Cort, “An Overview,” for a review of Jain narrative literature and such literature as history.

³For more information about the *satī*-narratives and Jain laywomen, see M. Whitney Kelting, “Thinking Collectively about Jain *Satīs*,” in *Studies in Jaina History and Culture: Disputes and Dialogues*, ed. Peter Flügel (London: Routledge, 2006), 181–207; and M. Whitney Kelting, *Singing to the Jinās: Jain Laywomen, Mandal Singing and the Negotiations of Jain Devotion* (New York: Oxford, 2006). Kelting’s research indicates that laywomen interpret the *satī*-narratives in ways that differ from nuns’ interpretations.

⁴Such biographies of famous Jain nuns have been recounted by N. Shāntā, *The Unknown Pilgrims, the Voice of the Sādhvīs: The History, Spirituality and Life of Jaina Women Ascetics* (Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1997), 571–629, 678–83. (This work is an English translation of Shāntā’s *La Voie Jaina: Histoire, spiritualité, vie des ascètes pelerines de l’Inde*, published by O.E.I.L. [Paris] in 1985.)

⁵For detailed information about *satīs* as wives or nuns, about chastity-producing power, and about nuns’ interpretations of the *satī*-narratives as relevant to their own lives as renunciators, see Sherry Fohr, “Gender and Chastity: Female Jain Renouncers” (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 2001).

⁶Some especially informative works addressing the issues of semen and power include Joseph S. Alter, “Seminal Truth: A Modern Science of Male Celibacy in North India,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1997): 275–98; Sudhir Kakar, *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Shiva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), republished in 1981 as *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic*; Peter van der Veer, “The Power of Detachment: Disciplines of Body and Mind in the Ramanandi Order,” *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 3 (1989): 458–70; and David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁷According to some of my Mūrtipūjak nun–collaborators, if a renouncer eats food from a house in which the Jain religion is not being strictly followed, the lack of purity from that house in turn affects the renouncer’s state of being. Specifically, the purity or impurity of the cook is the most significant. This belief is similar to Hindu conceptions of how purity and impurity are transmitted through food from the cook to the eater (or from an eater to another eater of the first eater’s leftovers). However, it is less similar to

the Hindu idea of gift giving, which transfers the *pāp* (sin, bad karma) or inauspiciousness of the giver to the receiver. John Cort, in *Jains in the World: Religious Values and Ideology in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 108–11, points out that, while this latter Hindu idea of giving entails the transference of *pāp* from the giver to the receiver (in cases where the receiver is not a renouncer), the Jain idea of giving to renunciators involves no such transfer of *pāp* to the renouncer–receiver. Instead, Cort states, the Jain conception of this transaction is different in that the Jain lay-giver accumulates *pāp* from cooking the food but accumulates more *puṇya* (merit, good karma) than *pāp* by giving the food to the renouncer. The renouncer remains unchanged in the amount of *puṇya* or *pāp* he or she has, because renunciators are seen not to “eat” food but only to “use” food so that they may continue striving for liberation. They do not ask for the food to be prepared, nor do they care about how it tastes. Furthermore, in theory, renunciators do not ask for food, but, rather, members of the Jain laity ask them to accept the food. In short, according to Jain ideology, no desire is connected with the food, and, therefore, no accumulation of *pāp* occurs. Cort further states that the *pāp* of the giver is “destroyed, not just transferred” in the process of this Jain giving. Nonetheless, it is possible for some type of impurity to be transferred in the action of giving food to renunciators, according to some of my nun–collaborators; more research is needed to further understand this process.

⁸An interesting legend about the Digambar monk who wrote the Tamil epic *Cīvakacintāmaṇi* involves slander against his chastity and his proving his chastity. This epic is full of eroticism; but, according to legend, the author of this text was a monk who had renounced as a child. People who read this work could not believe that someone who had never had sexual relations could have written a work full of this much sexual content. To prove his chastity, Tirrutakkatēvar, the monk–author, picked up a “red hot iron” saying that, if he had not been celibate his entire life, may his tongue be burnt by the iron. His tongue was not burnt, and his chastity was proved. See James Ryan, “Erotic Excess and Sexual Danger in the *Cīvakacintāmaṇi*,” in *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Culture in Indian History*, ed. John E. Cort (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 67–83: 68–69.

⁹Touching a monk in this way is actually forbidden in most Jain communities. Usually, a renouncer should never come in physical contact with anyone of the opposite sex.

¹⁰Conversation in Ladnun on March 15, 1999.

¹¹See Phyllis Granoff, “Paradigms of Protection in Early Indian Religious Texts, or, An Essay on What to Do with Your Demons,” in *Essays in Jaina Philosophy and Religion* 2, ed. Piotr Balcerowics (Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass, 2002), 180–212.

¹²The term *gaṇinī* refers to the head of a group of nuns.

¹³See Gerald T. Carney’s article, “From Ashram to Condo” (pp. 137–56, in this issue), for information on the various roles of spiritual leaders at *āśrams* (ashrams).

¹⁴Conversation in Hastinapur, February 1999.