

Female Divinities – Mortal, Heroic & Mythical In Jaina Religion

Reference to Ancient Jaina Scriptures, Sculptures and Paintings

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Jainism is one of the ancient religions in India, traces its history through twenty four male monks called Jinas or Tirthankaras. In the early phase of Jainism, the women were strictly restricted in the religious sphere. However Mallinatha - a sole female mortal was an exception who transformed herself to the nineteenth Digambar Jaina Tirthankara. Only during the period of the final Tirthankara by name Vardhamana Mahavira (Circa 599-527 B.C.) the Jain community and its doctrines were expounded. Accordingly, women were admitted in the religious sphere as 'laywomen' (*shravika*) and 'nuns' (*sadhavi*) and some attained enlightenment (*kevalagyana*). Further to this, several mortal heroines (*sati* and *mahasati*) for their chastity are placed on the pedestal of divinity, and are worshipped in Jain religion. In terms of godly mother figures the mortal royal mother of Tirthankara Vardhamana Mahavira is measured as a significant divine mother. Besides this, Jains worship a number of female mythical deities, categorized as *devi* and *yakshi/yakshini* who as guardian deities (*shasanadevi*) of each Tirthankara assigned to protect them from the worldly attractions. The images of such tutelary deities (*shasanadevis*) are seen placed alongside the tangible images of Tirthankaras with whom they are venerated by Jains. Also, a number of female tutelary deities (*shasanadevis and yakshinis*) though are associated with the Tirthankaras, yet they hold an independent status of divine motherly figure (*matrika*) in Jaina religious pantheon. This paper brings an account on female divinities of mortal, heroic and mythical category in Jaina faith in terms of their origin, mythology, and iconography drawn from the scriptures, paintings and sculptures respectively. The visual examples presented in this paper are derived from ancient Jain religious temples and historical sites extant in varied regions in India.

Key words: Tirthankara, Moksha, Sati, Devi, Yakshi.

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