

## Female Divinities – Mortal, Heroic & Mythical in Jaina Religion

### Reference to Ancient Jaina Scriptures, Sculptures and Paintings

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Jainism, also known as Jaina Dharma (doctrine) is one of the ancient religions in India. Its history is traced through the twenty four male monks called Jinas or Thirthankaras. The antiquity of Jainism stays in question; however its emergence as per the historical evidences may date to the contemporary Vedic epoch.<sup>1</sup> Jaina doctrines challenged mainly the traditions of blood sacrifice (*bali*); and the concept of rebirth of the soul (*punarjanma*) practiced in the Vedic traditions. Consequently, the principles in Jaina Dharma were based on non-violence (*ahimsa*), enlightenment (*kevalagyana*), and achievement of the ultimate bliss (*nirvna/moksha*). The foremost sect in Jainism followed ascetic tradition, which exclusively admitted the men in their monkhood, and required them to renounce entirely the material world including their clothes (*nagna*), hence the founder Jaina sect attained the name Digambara (sky-clad meaning ‘nagna’ bereft of clothes as one is born). Though the Jaina doctrine from its initial stages advocated gender equality, yet in Digambara sect women were strictly restricted from Jaina shrines, so also from the monkhood. However, during the period of Vardhamana Mahavira the final Jina, the code of conduct for women was formulated, consequently they were permitted to join as laywomen (*shravika*) and nun (*sadhavi*) in the path of liberation (*moksha*). The emergence of subsequent Shwetambra (white-clad) sect of Jainism<sup>2</sup> was more liberal as they accepted gender equality in monkhood; further to this, acknowledged several female divinities in Jaina religious pantheon. The images of female divines were represented in paintings and in sculptures which adorned the Jaina shrines and temples. Eventually, several female divines in the form of attendant goddesses (*shasanadevis*) were adopted also by the acetic oriented Digambara sect.

### Divine Women in Jaina Religion

#### Legends, Myths and Iconography

In Jainism, a number of women who belonged to mortal, heroic and mythical realms were deified for their virtues and knowledge in spirituality. Such divine female deities are worshipped by Jainas either along with Jinas, or as individual groups. In the mortal category as per the Jnatrdharagmakathah or Nayadhammokahayo<sup>3</sup> canonical Jaina text of circa 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the nineteenth Jina called Mallinatha was a woman who joined monkhood in the mid phase of Digambara tradition in Jainism. The Digambaras do not accept this statement; however the legend in the same text about Mallinatha, and the archaeological evidence both support that Jina Mallinatha was a mortal woman. As per the legend, Mallinatha was born as a princess to King Kumbha and his queen Prabhavati of Mithila (in north East India); the girl child was named ‘Malli’ (jasmine flower in Sanskrit), who

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developed deep quest for spiritual knowledge in her youth, and succeeded in attaining enlightenment (*kevalagyana*)<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, ‘natha’ which gives the meaning ‘lord’ was suffixed with her maiden name ‘Malli’, thus transformed to a male (by name) she was admitted in the pantheon of Jinas.<sup>5</sup> As per the Shwethambra sect in another version, Malli in her previous life was a male monk called Mahabala, later was born as a female (Malli).<sup>6</sup> because of his deceitful behavior with his fellow monks. Whatsoever, in terms of archaeological proof, a rare sculpture of Mallinatha (Fig. 1) in his female form is traced in Unnava - in the State Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), North India. The sculpture dates back to Kushana/Gupta periods (between circa 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D - 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), and presently is well preserved in Lucknow Museum (Object No.J885), North India.<sup>7</sup> The head of this sculpture is mutilated, so also the water-pot (*kumbha*)<sup>7</sup> - the distinctive mark of Jina Mallinatha in the center of the seat (*peetha*) is faded; however the cross legged seated posture (*padmasana*), developed breasts, braid (seen at the back) and the traces of attire, clearly indicate the female physique and features.<sup>8</sup> Some Jaina scholars disputed about Mallinatha’s hair as in tradition of Jina it should be shaved; however it is argued that Malli might have been radical as she kept her identity in the midst of male Jinas.<sup>9</sup> Further to this, it is noticed that while the other Jinas in sculptures besides their seated position are portrayed also in a straight standing posture (*samapada*), whereas the images of Mallinatha is shown always in a seated cross legged position (*padmasana*), with both hands folded in a saintly posture (*dhyanamudra*).<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, a wall painting of Vijayanagara period (circa 15<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.) in Tiruparuttikunram Jaina Temple, Tamil Nadu depicts a Jina is given sacred bath (*abhishekha*) by two attendants (*shasanadevis?*). The image of Jina shows a young sleek human figure, developed breast, and unshaven shaven, the seat (*peetha*) is bereft of any distinct mark, however the attendants holding ‘*kumbha*’ a distinct attribute of Mallinatha; along with the physical feature may suggest this image as Mallinatha? (Fig.2).

Besides Mallinatha, there were a number of mortal women who although did not transform themselves to Jina, but with their virtues embraced the path of salvation (*moksha*), and consequently were deified. In this respect, the most significant female divinities, those transformed from the mortal realm to the rank of Sadhavis and Mahasatis are: Brahmi, Sundari, Rajimati, and Chandanbala (Fig. 3). The legends on these Jaina female divinities appeared since circa 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. onward,<sup>11</sup> and as per the Jaina ‘Stri Nirvana Prakarana’ text “these four divine female women for their good conducts (*sattva*) are worshipped even by the gods and the demons”.<sup>12</sup> Besides this, the Jainas venerate also Jinamatas meaning the ‘mothers of Jinas’, and among them queen Vama - the mother of Jina Parshavanatha, and Trishala the mother of Mahavira are significant. The queen Trishala holds more popularity for being the mother of Jina Mahavira – who is measured as a significant reformer of Jaina Dharma. Queen Trishala the Jinamata of Jina Mahavira is depicted mostly in Jaina manuscripts. One of her motherly images is seen with infant Mahavira in Kalpasutra a Jaina manuscript (Fig. 4), which is painted on a paper with gouache (circa 1375-1400 A.D.). Such ancient Jaina manuscripts and scriptures are well preserved to this day in Jaina libraries (*bhandara*)<sup>13</sup>.

Further to this, the female divinities drawn from the heroic sphere worshipped in the Jaina religion are the virtuous mortal wives, who had been faithful to their respective husbands, also joined them as ‘sati’ after their death;<sup>14</sup> the women who had adopted the path of self sacrifice (*mahasati*),<sup>15</sup> also are included in the sphere of heroism. In Jainism, the sixteen distinguished female divinities (*solah-sati*) are worshipped to this day mainly by the Shwetambra Jaina sects. The names of ‘*solah-satis*’ are: Brahmi, Sundari, Chandanabala, Rajimati, Draupadi, Kaushalya, Mrugavati, Sulasa, Sita, Subhadra, Shiva, Kunti, Shilavant, Damayanti, Prabhavati, and Padmavati. It is observed that a number of names of these ‘*solah-satis*’ are derived from the names mentioned in Vedic, Epic and Puranic scriptures.<sup>16</sup>

For example, Brahmi is mentioned in the Vedic literatures,<sup>17</sup> Kaushalya, Sita in the Great Epic Ramayana; Kunti, Drapadi, Subhadra, Damayanti in the Great Epic Mahabharata; Shiva, Padmavati in Shaiva and Vaishnava Puranas; respectively; however the group of sixteen female divinities (*solah-sati*) mentioned above are associated exclusively with Jainism. Besides this, in the mythical sphere there are numerous female divines, some configured in groups, some in an individual form, worshipped by both Digambaras and Shwethambara Jainas. The group of eight female goddesses called Ashtamatrikas holds great significance in Jaina religion. The Matrika (divine mothers) cult *per se* originated in popular folk cultures especially those practiced the fertility cult and venerated the forest spirits called Yakshas and Yakshis.<sup>18</sup> The earliest tangible evidence of such pre historic heptads is seen on an Indus Valley seal;<sup>19</sup> the Great Epic Mahabharata also mentioned the Matrika group of deities who dwelled in woods.<sup>20</sup> Thus the Matrika worship was absorbed from the pre historic popular cultures in Hinduism, Buddhism and also in Jainism. The Jaina text Shasthisamskara Vidhi mentioned about the Jaina saint Acharadinakara invoking the Asthamatrikas which contained Brahmani, Maheshari, Kaumari Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrani, Chamunda, and Tripura.<sup>21</sup> The group having same name is found in Hindu pantheon as well;<sup>22</sup> however the iconographic distinction that may identify them as Jainaa Ashtamatrikas. In this regard, it is noticed that while the Matrikas of other traditions bear ferocious myths and iconography the Jaina Matrikas are attributed serene features (*shanthabhava*) in sculptures. Besides the assorted group of Matrikas some female deities such as Dikpalini Matrikas - the guardian deities are venerated in Jainism. An example of Dikpalini Matrika is seen in the exterior of Sambhavanathji Jaina temple, Kumbhariya in Gujarat. Besides this, the Deogarh Fort in north India contains a number of Matrika reliefs of Gupta periods (Circa 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.), which were absorbed in Jainism when Jaina influence commenced in those areas in circa 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Further to this, there are sixteen benevolent female deities configured in a single group named as Mahavidyas (great goddesses of knowledge) are worshipped by both Digambara and Shwethambara Jainas. The names of Jaina Mahavidyas are: Rohini, Prajnapati, Vajrashrnkhala, Vajranakusha/Kulishankhusha, Aparaticakra/Chakreshwarri/Jambunada, Naradatta/Purushadatta; Kali/Kalika; Mahakali, Gouri, Gandhari, Sarvastramahajvala/Jvalamalini, Manavi, Vairotya/Vairoti, Achupta/Achyuta, Manasi, and Mahamanasi.<sup>23</sup> These female Jaina deities are depicted in sculptures, however the entire group in one panel is rare; and the only one thus far seen having the full group of Mahavidyas are on the ceiling in Jina Shanthinatha Temple in Kharmbaria (Banaskantha), Gujarat (circa 1077 A.D.); in Vimala Vasahi Temple they are split in two panels - eight in a set in two different places: one set is on the ceiling of temple hall (*rangamandapa*: circa 1230 A.D.) and the other set of eight Mahavidyas on the corridor ceiling (*pradakshinapatha*; Cell No 41: Circa 1185 A.D.).<sup>24</sup> Other significant mythical deities in Jaina religion are the Yakshis (Fig. 5) or Yakshinis (demi goddesses). It is believed that the Yakshis are possessed with full passion, therefore similar to the mortals (*jiva*) they wander through the cycles of births and death (*jeevan-chakra*). The Jaina Yakshis paired with Yakshas were standardized only in circa 11-12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. According to the Jaina literature Tiloyapannatti (or Pratishthasarasangraha) and Abhidhanachintamani, the Yakshi/Yakshinis are twenty-four in numbers namely: Chakreshwari, Rohini/Ajitbala, Prajnapati/Duritari, Arashrakhala/Kali, Vajrankusha/Mahakali, Manovega/Shyama, Kali/Shanta; Jwalamanili/Bhrikuti, Mahakali/Sutraraka, Manavi/Ashoka, Gauri/Manavi, Gandhari/Chanda, Vairoti/Vidita, Anantamati/Ankusha, Manasi/Kandarpa; Mahamansi/Nirvani, Jaya/Bala, Taradevi/Dharini, Vijaya/Dharanpriya, Aparajita/Nardatta, Bahurupini/Gandhari, Ambika/Kushmandini, Padmavati, and Siddayika. Each Yakshi in the group of twenty four is assigned to each Jina as his protector goddess (*shasanadevi*). Further to this, three Yakshis namely Chakreshwari, Ambika and

Padmavati in the above group are prominent for their association with the Jina Adinatha (founder of Jainism), Neminatha and Padmanatha respectively. These three Yakshis also attain the status of individual goddesses in the Jaina pantheon; but in practice (worship) they still remain subservient to Jinas. In terms of physical and iconographic features, similar to Brahmanical and Buddhist Yakshis,<sup>25</sup> the Jaina Yakshis are also attractive having anthropomorphic physique with exaggerated feminine twist, and pleasing features. The Jaina Yakshi Chakreshwari is also called Apratichakra, the attendant deity (*shasanadevi*) of Jina Adinath (Rishabhadev) is carved on a stone, presently housed at the Government Museum, Mathura in Uttar Pradesh, North India (Fig. 6). She bears an anthropomorphic physique, standing in straight posture (*samapada*), attributed multiple hands most of them are holding mythical wheel (chakra), she is decked with ornaments and halo (*chandramandala*) having floral design carved on it; the panel above her halo contains a number of seated and standing Jain monks and female divines; her personality is shown rigid yet the feminine luster is not missing in this sculpture (Fig.6).

The other significant Jaina Yakshi is Ambikadevi associated with the twenty second Jina Neminatha. She is called also Ambai, Amba, Amra and Kushmandini. The sculpture of Ambikadevi obtained from Rajasthan, India, presently in Museum Rietberg, (Fig.7) shows her as an attractive divine female figure, she is attributed four hands the objects in right hind hand perhaps is rein (*kasha*), left hind hand is damaged; right forehand is holding mango fruit (*amraphala*) and the left hand is holding her sons; her vehicle is lion (*simha*) carved on her seat not so clear though, she is seated in left leg folded right in dangling posture (*vamalalitasana*); she is decked with ornaments and has a pleasing facial expression (Fig.7). So also the other prominent Jaina Yakshi Padmavatidevi. the protector deity (*shasanadevi*) of the twenty third Jina Parshavanath, is shown as a young and attractive female divine in the sculpture located in Devagarh Fort, in north India (Fig.8). She bears a charming face, seated with her left leg folded, right in dangling position (*vamalalitasana*); has four hands upper hands hold lotus (*padma*) and lower hands fruit (*phala*) and rein (*kasha*); the five hooded snake (*panchamukhanaga*) is seen over her head; her vehicle (*vahana*) snake with a cocks head (*sarpa-with-kukkuta*) is also seen at the base she is seated; she is decked with ornaments carved intricately (Fig.8). Furthermore, two prominent goddesses Saraswati and Lakshmi for their association with knowledge and wealth extended the Jaina pantheon. Etymologically, the name Saraswati in Sanskrit meant ‘essence of self’ (*sara*: essence; *swa*: self, *ti*: suffix for female), apparently she has been the source of life as River Saraswati, and also the source of knowledge (*vidya*). In terms of antiquity, the mention of Saraswati is found in the Rig Veda the oldest writing extant of Indian subcontinent.<sup>26</sup> Saraswati is absorbed in the Vedic (Hindu), Buddhist realm;<sup>27</sup> and as Jainas worshipped their manuscripts and literatures, apparently Saraswati as the goddess of knowledge<sup>28</sup> was absorbed in Jain pantheon. Consequently, as per her epithet Vach (*speech*) she is referred as the speech of Jinas, and in Jainism her name is Strutadevata. Saraswati’s iconography in ancient Jaina Sutras such as in Bhagawati- Sutra, Mahanistha- Sutra, Sansare-Daranala etc., mentioned her having a number of forms bearing different attributes. Accordingly the marble image of Saraswati in Vimala Vasahi temple of Dilwara at Mount Abu, shows her in a seated position, holding Veena similar to the Saraswati in Hindu pantheon (photo not available); whereas her other image (Fig. 9) obtained probably from Rajasthan, India, presently housed in the British Museum shows the deity in a twofold (*dwibhanga*) standing position; having four hands, the lower left hand is holding a book (*pustaka*) and the upper left is having lotus (*padma*) carved intricately; her two right hands are damaged. The image of Saraswati is surrounded by standing and seated Jinas and other Yakshas and Yakshis (demi gods and goddesses) images.<sup>29</sup> The other celebrated goddess in Jaina pantheon is Lakshmi who signifies wealth. Her image carved on stone is seen in Shravanabelagola

Jaina shrine in Karnataka. She is shown in the form of Gajalakshmi, bears anthropomorphic figure, pleasing facial expression, seated in crossed leg posture (*padmasana*) on the stone seat with lotus carved on it (*padmapitha*), attributed two hands both holding lotus (*padma*), and she is flanked symmetrically by two elephants (*gaja*) carved in realistic form on either sides (Fig. 10).

## **Conclusion**

Jainism at the outset stressed on venerating only the twenty four Digambara Jinas; however, during the period of the final Jina Mahavira - a religious reformer, the rigid norms of Jainism saw some flexibility in the admission of women in their monkhood. Further to this, the subsequent Shwethambara sect was open-minded as it enriched the Jaina religious pantheon with male and a galaxy of female deities drawn from the mortal, heroic and mythical spheres as explained above. The origin of Jainism is disputed by scholars or other contemporary faiths namely Hindu and Buddhism with which Jainism coexisted and continues in India. Jaina faith entered South India since the time of monarch Chandragupta Maurya (circa 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC);<sup>30</sup> apparently with favorable royal support established itself in religious thoughts (*Jainaa dharma*), art and architecture. In due course, its rapid growth was sensed as a threat to Shaivism, to the upcoming Vaishnavism and Veerashavism in the southern regions, hence around circa 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the Jainas were made to move to other regions; and since circa 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. onward they established religious, political and artistic supremacy in North India. The contribution of Jaina in the field of art and architecture remains unmatched. Their caves and freestanding temples with intricate carvings are marvelous; so are the images of divines precisely the female deities which on one hand express the feminine glow exaggerated to the utmost, on the other they bear profound sense of motherhood (*matribhava*) (Fig. 7, 8, 9, 10). Also, it is sensed that while Jainism as a religion founded with a severe male oriented doctrine, the females despite restrictions yet made their ways: into the monkhood e.g. Mallinatha; the deified Sadhavis, Satis, Mahasatis, entered the Jaina religious pantheon; so also the Yakshi goddesses in their most striking appearance as seen in sculptures, attained status of protecting goddesses (*shasanadevis*) of the twenty four Jinas who repudiated the material world (Fig.6,7, 8).

## **Reference and Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Qvarnström, Olle (Ed.); Jainism and Early Buddhism: Essays in Honor of Padmanabh S. Jaini; Jain Publishing Company, 2003, p.410
- <sup>2</sup> Four sects are in Jainism: Earliest Digambara (sky-clad), unclothed, conservative; women restricted in monkhood Shwetambra (white clad) monks wear one/two pieces of white unstitched cloth; women allowed into monkhood; Sthanakvasis (circa 18 century AD) offshoot of Shwetambra sect do not venerate sculpture of Jinas, focus on individual austerities (self-denial); Therapanthis: reject image worship, preacher (guru) Acharya is supreme.  
<https://www.coursehero.com/file/8480438/Jainism-Notes/>
- <sup>3</sup> Wiley, Kristi L.; The A to Z of Jainism; Scarecrow Press, 2009, p.xxi
- <sup>4</sup> Shah, Umakant Premanand; Jaina Iconography, Volume 1 of Jaina-rūpa-maGana; Abhinav Publications, 1987, p. 160

- <sup>5</sup> Shah, Natubhai; Jainism: The World of Conquerors, Volume 1 Motilal Banarsidass Publishe 1998, p.21
- <sup>6</sup> Wiley, Kristi L.; *Op.Cit*, p.136
- <sup>7</sup> Nagar, Shanti Lal; Glory of Jaina Tirthankaras; Eastern Book Linders, 2006, p. 230
- <sup>8</sup> Kumbha: refers to ‘pot’ in Sanskrit language; metaphorically associated with women; therefore it is possible Malli as woman receiving ‘kumbha’ as a distinct mark of her Jinahood.
- <sup>9</sup> Shah, Umakant Premanand; *Op. Cit*, p. 160
- <sup>10</sup> Raman, Sita Anantha; Women in India: A Social and Cultural History (2 Volumes); A Social and Cultural History; ABC-CLIO, 2009, p.
- <sup>11</sup> Shah, Umakant Premanand; *Op. Cit*, p. 160
- <sup>12</sup> Fohr, Sherry; Jainism: A Guide for the Perplexed; Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, p.126
- <sup>13</sup> Raman, Sita Anantha;*Op. Cit*; p.85
- <sup>14</sup> Glasenapp, Helmuth von; Jainism: An Indian Religion of Salvation; Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1999, p. 106
- <sup>15</sup> Self Sacrifice/Immolation: referred to divine/mythical women (Sita of Ramayan; Daksha of Purana) as an event (*ghatna*) mentioned in Hindu scriptures; however as a tradition (*pratha*) it was advocated by Sage Angirasa; bloomed consistently as ‘mandatory’ among kshtraya (warrior) clans of Hindu, and in Jainism; such women were eulogized, deified and worshipped. The ‘sati’ system was declared a criminal act, abolished by the Governor William Bentinck in 18 Centuries during British Rule in India. Ashenburg, Katherine; *The Mourner’s Dance: What We Do When People Die*; Macmillan, 2004, p.165
- <sup>16</sup> Mahasati: Also a general designation for a nun in the later Sthanakavasi Jain tradition. Wiley, Kristi L.; *The A to Z of Jainism*; Scarecrow Press, 2009, p.132
- <sup>17</sup> <http://www.jainpedia.org/themes/people/women-in-the-jain-tradition/sol-sati.html>
- <sup>18</sup> Yegnaswamy, Jayalakshmi, “Brahmani or Brahmi Regional Variations in Classical Iconography as traced in Karnataka”; KALA Journal of Indian Art History Congress, Edited by Prof. Dr. R.D. Chaudhury, 2009.
- <sup>19</sup> Blurton, T. Richard; *Hindu Art*; Harvard University Press, 1993, p.161
- <sup>20</sup> Wangu, Madhu Bazaz; *Images of Indian Goddesses: Myth, Meanings, and Models*; Abhinav Publications, 2003, p.76
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.41
- <sup>22</sup> Vashishtha, Neelima; *Sculptural Traditions of Rajasthan: Ca. 800-1000*; Publication Scheme, 1989, p. 149
- <sup>23</sup> Number ‘Eight’ relates to ‘perfection’, thus ‘Ashtamatrikas’ (8 matrikas) was absorbed in both Tantric sect of Hinduism and later Buddhism; Bunce, Fredrick W.; *Numbers, Their Iconographic Consideration in Buddhist and Hindu Practices*; D.K. Printworld, 2002, p.41
- <sup>24</sup> Wiley, Kristi L.; *Op. Cit*, p.133
- <sup>25</sup> Vyas, R. T., Umakanth Parmanand Shah (Ed.): *Studies in Jaina Art and Iconography and Allied Subjects in Honor of Dr. U.P. Shah*; Article: *Jaina Iconography: Evolution and Appraisal by Maruti Nandan Prasad Tiwari*; Abinav Publication, 1995, p. 17
- <sup>26</sup> Quinn, Edward; *Critical companion to George Orwell, Critical companion Encyclopedia of World Religions Series*; Infobase Publishing, 2014, p. 508

<sup>27</sup> Burgess Ebenezer What is truth? An inquiry concerning the antiquity and unity of the human race; Oxford University, 1871, p.11

<sup>28</sup> Chandra, Suresh; Encyclopaedia of Hindu Gods and Goddesses; Sarup & Sons, 1998, p. 295

<sup>29</sup> Elgood, Heather Hinduism and the Religious Arts; Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000, p.77

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.jaindharmonline.com/more/articles4.htm>

<sup>31</sup> Sangave Vilas Adinath, Facets of Jainology: Selected Research Papers on Jain Society, Religion, and Culture; Popular Prakashan, 200, p.174