



TO INITIATE A DIALOGUE ON THE ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE JAIN COMMUNITY

VISUAL COMMUNICATION | PROJECT 3

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APPROVAL SHEET

The project titled To initiate a dialogue on the role and status of women in the Jain Community by Rucha Vakhariya, is approved for partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of 'Master of Design' in Visual Communication.

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DECLARATION

I declare that this written submission represents my ideas in my own words and where others' ideas or words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources. I also declare that I have not misrepresented or fabricated or falsified any idea/date/fact/source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will cause a disciplinary action by the Institute and also can evoke penal action from the sources which have not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

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You inspire me!

ABSTRACT

Jains are statistically a very progressive community. They are highly educated, they have made their mark in almost every walk of life. They live comfortable lives and have a high standard of living. Even the women in the community have a very high literacy rate. But despite all the prosperity, Jainism cannot boast of treating its women right.

Jainism is a patriarchal religion like most other religions in the country, And through the years, women in Jainism have had a secondary status. Examples of this can be seen in the stories, scriptures and general hierarchy in the society. This has percolated in the society that we live in today. Not just the lay women, but also the nuns are given a secondary status in the community.

Despite being educated, most women do not stand up against the prejudices and the injustice that happens in everyday life. This project is an attempt at questioning these everyday practices and starting a dialogue in the community.

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INTRODUCTION

Jainism is considered one of the most progressive religions in the country. Statistically we are highly educated, most of us live in the urban setting and have a better standard of living than other communities. Jain community though very small in numbers, also contributes a significantly to the GDP of India. But like many other religions in India, Jainism is highly patriarchal in nature and the women in the community suffer from prejudice in their daily lives even today. Though statistically a large section of the women in the community are literate, very few stand up against injustice and speak their minds. This project is an attempt to make people think and have an opinion about the everyday inequality present in the community.

WHAT IS JAINISM?

Jainism is an Indian religion that prescribes the path of non-violence towards all living beings. Jains reject the idea of a creator or destroyer of the universe. They believe that universe has been and will be in existence eternally. They worship Jina, the one who has conquered the internal enemies and the impurities of the soul like attachment (raga) and hatred (dwesha). According to Jains, souls are intrinsically pure and possess the qualities of infinite knowledge, infinite perception, infinite bliss and infinite energy in their ideal state. The ultimate goal of a Jain is to attain moksha, which means liberation or salvation of the soul completely freeing it from Karmic bondage.

DIGAMBAR AND SHVETAMBAR

Jains were divided into two groups, Shvetambar and Digambar, nearly six hundred years after the nirvana of Lord Mahavir. The process of the split continued from the third century B.C. up to the first century of the Christian Era. In the third century B.C. famous Jain saint Bhadrabahu predicted a long and severe famine in the kingdom of Magadha (in modern Bihar) and with a view to avoid the terrible effects of famine Bhadrabahu, along with a body of 12,000 monks, migrated from Pataliputra, the capital of Magadha, to Shravanabelagola (in modern Karnataka State) in South India. Chandragupta Maurya who was then the Emperor of Magadha and was a devotee of Acharya Bhadrabahu, abdicated his throne in favor of his son Bindusara, joined Bhadrabahu's entourage as a monk, and stayed with Bhadrabahu at Shravanabelagola.

When the ascetics of Bhadrabahu-sangha returned to Pataliputra at the end of the twelve years of famine, they, to their utter surprise, noticed two significant changes that had taken place during their absence among the ascetics of Magadha under the leadership of Acharya Sthulibhadra. In the first place, the rule of nudity was relaxed and the ascetics were allowed to wear a piece of white cloth. Secondly, the sacred books were collected and edited at the council of Pataliputra in their absence in which they found

some inconsistencies. As a result the group of returned monks did not accept the two things, introduced by the followers of Acharya Sthulibhadra and proclaimed themselves as true Jains. Eventually, the Jain religion was split up into two distinct sects, the Digambar (sky-clad or stark naked) and the Shvetambar (white-clad) about 600 years after nirvana of Lord Mahavir.

When it comes to the philosophy of Jainism, there is essentially no difference between these two major sects. The following main differences exist between the Digambers and Shvetambers.

1. The Digambers believe that no original canonical text exists now. The Shvetambers still preserve a good number of original scriptures.
2. The Digambers strictly maintain that there can be no salvation without nakedness. Since women cannot go without clothes, they are said to be incapable of salvation. The Shvetambers hold that nakedness is not essential to attain liberation and thus, women are also capable of salvation.
3. The Digambers hold that Lord Mahavir was not married. The Shvetambers reject this view. According to them, Lord Mahavir was married and had a daughter.
4. The images of Tirthankars are not decorated at all by the Digambers, whereas the Shvetambers profusely decorate them.

Jain doctrine has been remarkably stable over the centuries and there has not been any serious change. This stability is largely due to Saint Umasvati's (Umaswami) Tattvarthasutra, written in the fourth or fifth century CE. This work written before the divisions between the Shvetambers and Digambers became final and is accepted by both branches of Jainism.

The two sects over the years have been divided into further sub-sects

Shvetambar Sub Sects

The Shvetambar sect has been split into three main sub-sects:

a) Murtipujaka, b) Sthanakvasi, and c) Terapanthi

Digambar Sub Sects

The Digambar sect, in recent centuries, has been divided into the following major sub-sects:

a) Bisapantha, b) Terapantha, and c) Taranapantha or Samaiyapantha

FOURFOLD SANGHA

Jainism has a fourfold order of

male monastics (muni/sadhu)

female monastics (aryika/sadhvi)

sravaka (layman)

sravika (laywoman).

This order is known as a sangha which means the entire community.

MONASTICISM IN JAINISM

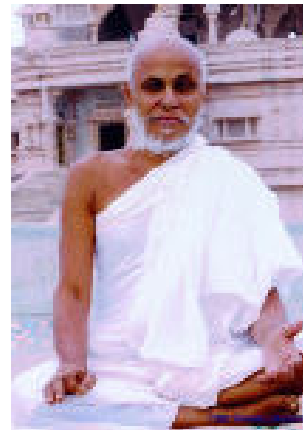
The nuns in Shvetambars are called Sadhvi and in Digambars are called Aryika. And the monks are called Sadhu and Muni respectively. Monastic practises of the two major sects vary greatly but the main principles remain the same.



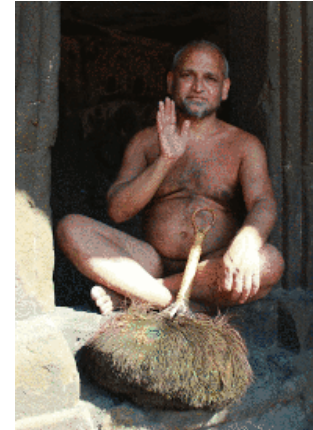
Sadhvi



Aryika



Sadhu



Muni

FIVE MAHAVRATAS

Right knowledge, right faith, and right conduct are the three essentials for attaining liberation in Jainism. In order to acquire these, one is expected to observe these five great vows also known as Mahavratas:

Non-violence - Ahimsa

Truth - Satya

Non-stealing - Achaurya or Asteya

Celibacy/Chastity - Brahmacharya

Non-attachment/Non-possession - Aparigraha

The five mahavratas are followed by both Shvetambara and Digambara.

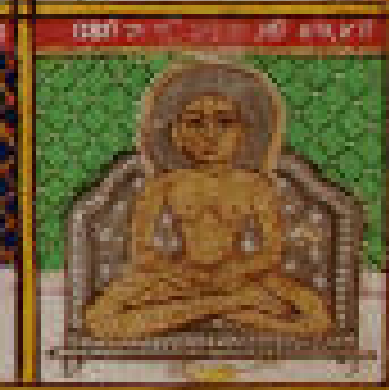
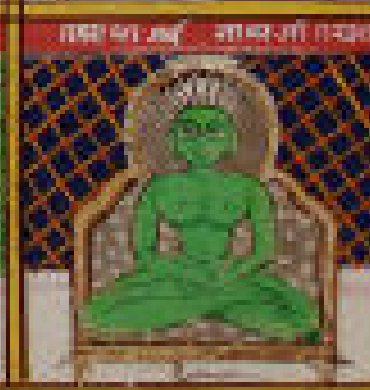
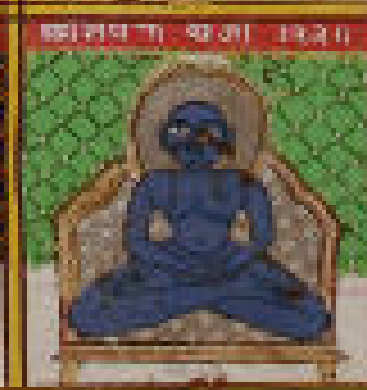
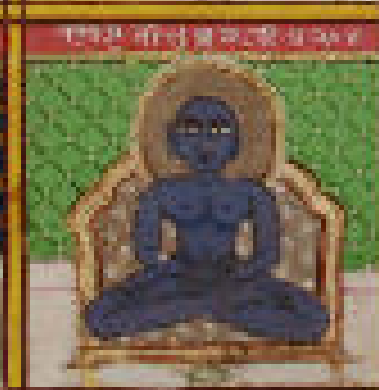
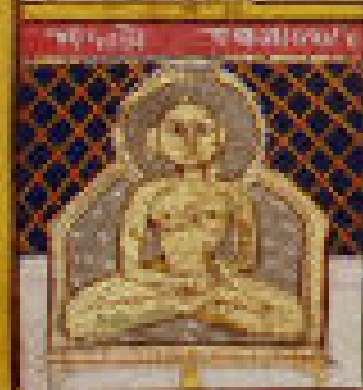
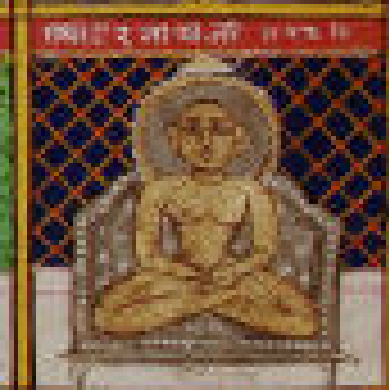
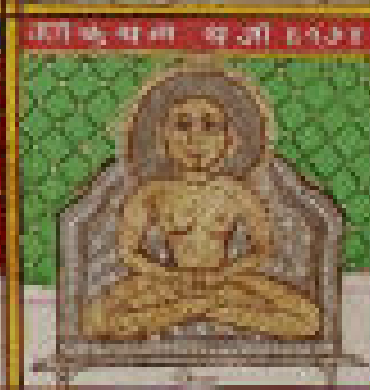
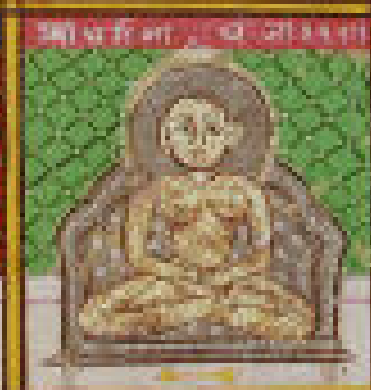
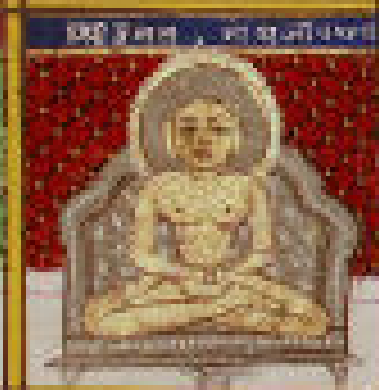
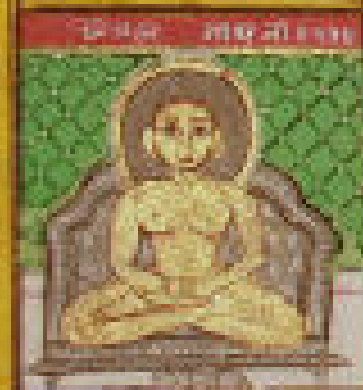
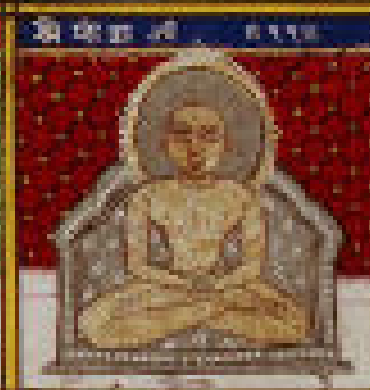
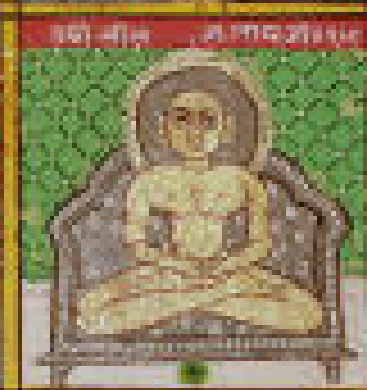
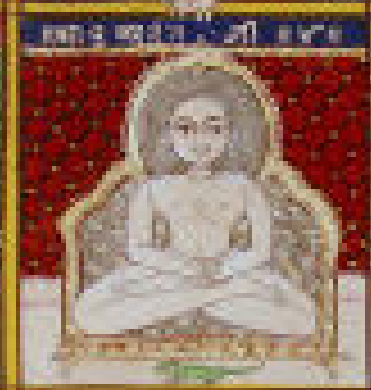
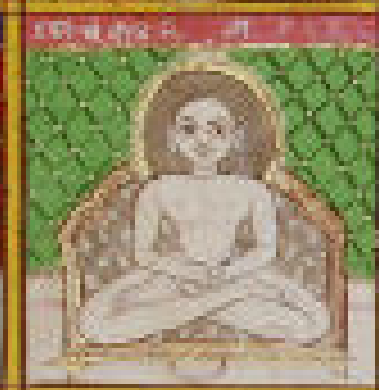
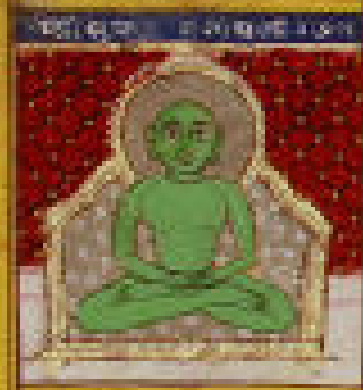
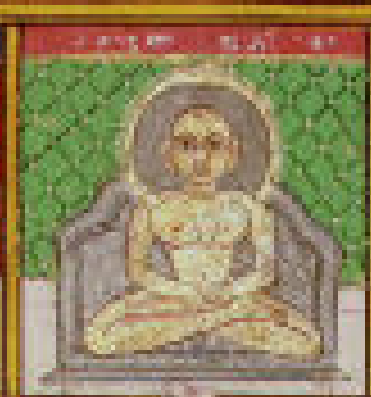
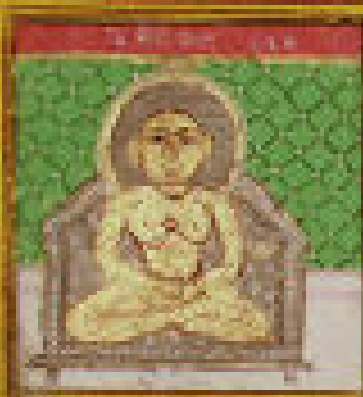


OVERVIEW OF THE JAIN POPULATION

According to the 2011 census report, **0.37%** of the total Indian population is Jain i.e. about **4.5 million** people out of which 2.2 million are women and 2.3 million are men.

Almost **3.5 million people stay in an urban setting**, with most number of people staying in Maharashtra followed by Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Tamil Nadu.

Literacy rate is very high in Jains. **94.1% of the population is literate** as compared to the national average of 65.38%. Female literacy is also very high with almost **90.6% women** being literate.



TIRTHANKAR

A Tirthankar is an omniscient teacher who preaches the dharma (righteous path). The word Tirthankar signifies the founder of a tirtha which means a fordable passage across a sea. The Tirthankar show the 'fordable path' across the sea of interminable births and deaths. According to Jains, the Jaina teachings are gradually forgotten. Then, a rare individual is born who at some point in his life renounces the world to conquer the samsara (the cycle of death and rebirth) on his own. After, performing Jaina penance the Tirthankar attains omniscience and refounds Jainism. Tirthankar provides a bridge for others to follow them from samsara to moksha (liberation).

According to Jain texts, in each half of the cosmic time cycle, exactly twenty-four Tirthankars grace this part of the universe. The first Tirthankar was Rishabhdev and the last i.e. the 24th Tirthankar of the present half-cycle was Mahavira (599-527 BC). History records the existence of Mahavira and his predecessor, Parshvanath, the twenty-third Tirthankar.

MALLINATH (19TH TIRTHANKAR)



Mallinath is the 19th Tirthankar and is believed to be a woman by the Shvetambars while the Digambara believe otherwise.

It is said that in the Aparvideh area, there was a city named Vitshoka which was ruled by King Mahabal. He was very close to six other kings who were his childhood friends. Influenced by discourses of ascetics, King Mahabal decided to follow the spiritual path along with his six friends. They took diksha (initiation) from Vardhaman Muni. King Mahabal thought that since he was always ahead of his friends in everything he did, he should do the same in spiritual practices. The desire to be above the ordinary inspired this competition.

As a result of this deception Mahabal acquired the karma that would result in him being born as a woman (Stri-ved).

However, as he still maintained the purity and intensity in his practices he later also earned the Tirthankar-nam-and-gotra-karma and thus became a Tirthankar in the next birth.

TEMPLE WORSHIP IN JAINS

Jains don't worship to please Gods in the hope of getting back something in return. Although Jains appear to worship Tirthankars in particular, they don't worship them as persons; what they worship is the ideal of perfection that the Tirthankars have achieved.

“Some religions preach that an individual can be saved by devotion to God, the saviour, or the God's incarnations and intermediaries. Jainism teaches that we can attain true peace and happiness only through behaving and thinking rightly.”

- Acharya Kundakunda
Most revered Digambar monk who lived in around 1st century BC.



Digambar Jain Temple



Shvetambar Jain Temple

WOMEN IN JAINISM

The religious status of women is one of the chief differences between the two principal sects of Digambara and Shvetambara. The Digambar Jain sect believes that women cannot achieve liberation without being reborn as men first. The Shvetambara sect disagrees.

Digambaras believe that since women are not allowed to be naked in public they cannot achieve liberation directly. Shvetambaras believe that wearing clothes is a societal need and as long as an individual is not attached to them, they can achieve salvation.

According to Digambaras, this ban on female nakedness is partly intended to protect both men and women. If women went around naked it would cause men to experience sexual desire and the desire produced would hinder the man's progress to liberation. And naked women would feel ashamed of being naked and the feeling of shame would hinder their progress to liberation.

Women are believed to be fickle minded and thus are said to find it difficult to concentrate while studying the Sutras (religious scriptures), thus disabling their path to salvation.

Digambaras also believe that women are inherently himsic (violent). This comes partly from a belief that menstrual blood kills micro-organisms living in the female body. This is contradicting to the basic philosophy of Jainism which usually concerns itself with thinking, speaking, and acting rightly. There isn't any other area where Jainism says that involuntary bodily functions are a spiritual obstacle.

Also a woman's nature is said to be caring - for children and other dependants, which makes it more difficult for her to break free from these earthly attachments, and unless she does this, she cannot achieve liberation.



Marudevi



Rajimati

HISTORY OF WOMEN IN JAINISM

There is a long list of women listed in the Jain literature, but a detailed description of very few is available. Some of them might even be legends and not historical figures. But Jain women have always looked up to these women for the ideals they set.

WOMEN IN THE LIVES OF THE TIRTHANKARAS

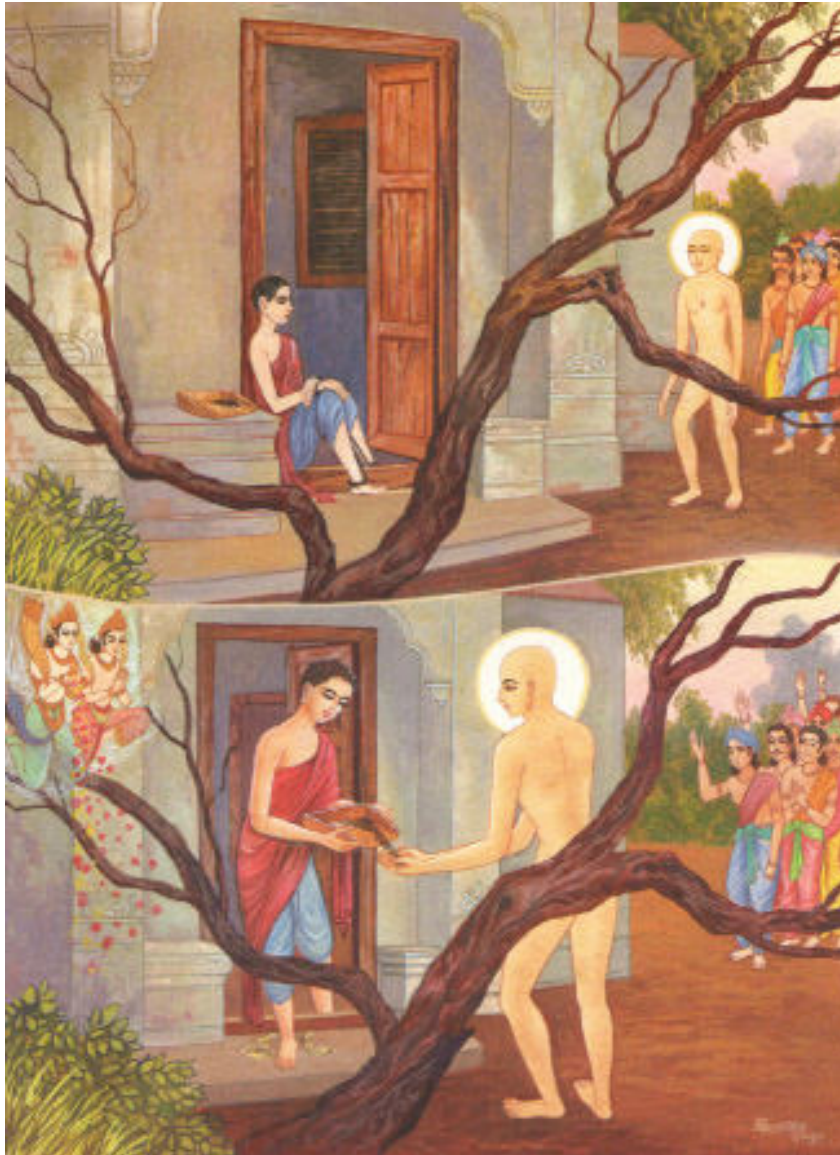
These are the women who are talked about even today for their spirit and sacrifices. Some of them that are highly regarded are:

Marudevi: Marudevi was the mother of the first tirthankar Rishabhdev. She is said to be the first lady in Jains to attain Keval Dyan (omniscience) and Moksha (liberation).

Brahmi and Sundari: Brahmi and Sundari are the daughters of Rishabhdev. He is believed to have given the knowledge of 18 alphabets to Brahmi and of arithmetic to Sundari. Sundari led a life of spinsterhood and became a nun and Brahmi was appointed the head of the nuns' group which comprised of 3 lakh nuns and 54,000 Sravikas.

Rajimati: Rajimati is described as a symbol of chastity and faithfulness towards her husband Bhagwan Neminath. Bhagwan Neminath was about to marry Rajimati when he heard the cries of animals being slaughtered and he decided to renounce the world and become a monk. Rajimati followed suit and became a nun herself. This showed her faithfulness to her husband. Bhagwan Neminath's brother Rathanemi, who was also a monk was attracted to Rajimati but she politely declined his marriage proposal and explained to him the holiness of being a monk. This shows she was very strict about her chastity and followed the rules of monasticism very strictly.

Pushpachula: Pushpachula was the head of nuns in the time of Bhagwan Parshvanath. Parshwanath had allowed men and women to be a part of his sangha irrespective of their caste, gender or class.



Chandanbala

STATUS OF WOMEN DURING BHAGWAN MAHAVIR'S TIME

Mahavir was certainly ahead of his times in welcoming women into his sangha without any discrimination based on caste, class and sex. He strongly believed in equality for all living beings. There is a shadow of doubt among the historians concerning the authenticity of Chandanbala, Mahavir's first woman disciple. But there are references for women from his family. Trishala (mother), Yashoda (wife), Priyadarshini (Daughter), Sudarshana (Sister), Jyeshtha (Elder Brother's wife) and Sheshavati (Grand-daughter) were all well educated and religious women.

YAKSHIS AND OTHER GODDESSES

There are also feminine deities in the Jain tradition. They are the female spiritual attendants - yakshis - of the 24 Tirthankars. Among them are Chakreshvari, Padmavati and Ambika connected respectively with the 22nd, 23rd and 24th Jinas. Goddess Sarasvati is also worshipped by Jains as she is by Hindus.

SOLA SATI

Sati refers to legendary women who, though they faced trying circumstances, remained faithful to their husbands or the religion. The number of satis is not restricted to 16. Some lists include more names of illustrious female models in both olden and modern times.



NUNS

In Shvetambar, the nuns have always outnumbered monks. According to the Shvetambar Jain book of discipline (Chedasutras), only three types of women are forbidden to receive diksha (initiation), those who are pregnant and those who are still young or have a small child.

Most rules of monasticism apply to both monks and nuns, but there are certain special rules and stricter restrictions imposed upon nuns:

1. A nun is not allowed to be alone.
2. A nun is not allowed to enter alone the house of a layman for food.
3. A nun is not allowed to enter alone a place to ease nature.
4. A nun is not allowed to be without a superior.

The inferior status of a nun results in the fact that even when they have had a longer religious life, they may be subordinate to the monks who have been initiated only a few years ago.

Nuns also require more number of years than monks to attain higher positions in the religious hierarchy. And the highest position i.e. Acharya is always held by a monk.

Some subsects like the Terapanthi and Sthanakvasi, claim that both monks and nuns can study all texts. But the Tapagaccha sect, for instance, states that nuns' abilities are lesser and therefore prevents them from studying the texts. The number of nuns giving public sermons is also limited, considering the global number of nuns.

LAY WOMEN IN JAINISM

Women and scriptures

Women are said to 'protect or continue the community' by passing on basic teachings to the younger generations, mainly through telling legends and stories. Listening to the daily sermons of monks and nuns, is another way in which lay women become familiar with Jain scriptures. They largely outnumber their male colleagues in these circumstances.

Women and everyday life

Women's knowledge and place in the community are mostly oriented towards two areas where they dominate, namely the preparation of food and performance of rituals.

Women and worship

Women usually outnumber men in the temple visit and performance of rituals there. Menstruating women, like many other religions are considered impure and thus, are not allowed to perform worship or undertake pilgrimages to sacred places. Women are also expected to cover their heads while entering a temple.



ISSUES WOMEN FACE IN THE COMMUNITY

(Most of the points in the following paragraphs are from observation and from various conversations I have had with men and women of all ages in the community over the years.)

Women in the community seem to have accepted that it is a lower birth to be born as a woman. Women are expected to suffer is something I have constantly heard all my life. My grandmother has always made me do things saying 'you have taken a woman's birth, you are supposed to do this'. I have been made to cook, clean up, sit properly, dress appropriately, cover up because I am a woman. There have been innumerable incidences where I have asked my younger male cousins for help with the house work, but the elders in the family have always expressed their displeasure about this.

A common conversation over the years has been around my lack of knowledge of religious scriptures. I have been told on multiple occasions that since I haven't studied the scriptures, I wouldn't get a good husband and a good family.

Whenever I have attended religious lectures, I have noticed that the Sadhvis always take a lower seating at the venue compared to the Sadhus. Most lectures are also given by Sadhus. Sadhvis are generally given a secondary treatment much like the lay women since they are lower in rank in the authority.

A lot of the issues in the community are also a result of the society we stay in. There is a cultural influence on how women are treated or how women are expected to behave. Anyone who has tried to question norms in the community has always been labelled a rebel and dismissed. The issues usually get suppressed right there making it difficult to start a healthy dialogue.

Many members of the younger generation feel that a lot of these issues are very trivial and questioning them constantly creates a negative atmosphere in their homes. They feel it is alright if these issues are not causing any great damage to anyone. A little sacrifice on everyone's part is expected.

IMPORTANCE OF THIS PROJECT

According to the Shvetambar scriptures such as the Chedasutra, women are given lesser authority than their male counterparts. The reasons for this, in the commentaries were that things which could endanger the vow of chastity should be avoided. Nalini Balbir writes, that the belief that women are more fragile than men were all pervading in these texts.

Digambar texts like Yuktiprabodh say that women's genitals and breasts are sources of impurity and have many micro-organisms living in them. Digambar Jain theologians have written that due to bodily secretions, women suffer from itching which gives them uncontrollable sexual urges. They believe that women cannot take higher vows of ascetic renunciation, because naked women would have two deep emotions - shame of being naked and fear of sexual assault which they might face.

The comments in the scriptures easily translate to how women live their lives today. And very rarely do women question things as to why they are the way they are. They accept their fate thinking it is what is written for them. Through this project I want women to at least start questioning things around them, however small or insignificant they are. Because change needs to begin somewhere and I aim to start through this project.

ACHARYA VIJAY RATNASUNDERSURI'S LECTURE



While I was working on this project there was a 10 days long event organised at Somaiya Grounds, Sion in Mumbai on the occasion of Acharya Vijay Ratnasundersuri's 300th book launch. Acharya Vijay Ratnasundersuri is a very well known and respected authority in the Jain community.

A number of ceremonies, lectures and performances were arranged for people to attend. One such lecture was organised only for women. The lecture was specially targetted towards young girls. There were 10K - 15K women in attendance. Acharya spoke about the daily conduct of women - how they should act around their husband - if they are both arguing, she should take the back seat (because she is capable of doing that) in order to maintain the sanctity of the house. He spoke about how the media is misleading women into believing that it is good to protest against their husband. This according to him is only leading to the loss of peace at home.

He spoke about contests being held to judge a woman's body but no contests were held to judge their purity. He kept stressing on the fact that a woman's wealth is her body and a man's wealth is his money. And woman should be careful about not giving access to this wealth to anyone.



Most women around me were readily agreeing to all he was saying. He is an excellent orator, anyone would get influenced by his ideas and thoughts. Unfortunately most of the things he was talking about were based on cliches and on societal conditioning. There was an underlying tone of women being weaker and secondary to men throughout the lecture. He kept questioning if there is a male authority in our lives who would set limits for us like Lakshman did for Sita. According to the points he raised, it was clear that women need to be more adjusting than the man, because it is in their nature and they are the ones that bind the family together. At no point during the two and a half hour lecture was there a discussion about women getting educated, making a difference to the society or standing up for what is wrong.

I don't mean to attack an individual through this project. From my years of experience of interacting with the people from our community, unfortunately most men and women agree with this view point. There is no point blaming one individual if a major section of the community doesn't feel there is something wrong with the way we behave today.

FORBIDDEN LINE

Forbidden Line is a book written by Acharya Vijay Ratnasundersuri which talks about the daily conduct of men and women in terms of their physical and mental relationships. Here are a few excerpts from the book

then men to take it is very easy to con such people.
If only women would realise this.
Realise that the weakness lies in
their emotionalism and how men
take advantage of this weakness.
If all college-going girls, working women etc.
would understand this, then they could save
themselves from this net laid out for them.
However, one question keeps coming to
my mind. Are only men responsible for
this state of affairs ?
Do women play no role in this whole situation ?
Is not their vulgar dress,
exposure of their body, their actions,
their 'make-up' etc.
an invitation to males ?
A successful person can carry lakhs of

the female sex.
Women are delicate like a flower,
whereas men are like thorns. In trying
to equalise the two, the loss is the woman's alone.
Flower have to be preserved in a flower-vase, whereas thorns
are safe anywhere. Woman's 'liberation',
'equality' etc. may have got woman international fame, equal
pay-packets, but in the bargain she has lost her inherent
'softness', her role as the main thread weaving the entire family
together, nurturing the children, caring for her husband, in-
laws etc.
Is it not pathetic ? Even she doesn't realise that in this bargain

you have said in your last letter.

Really just as wealth has to be kept away from public eyes, so too have women to be kept away from hungry male eyes.

Now I understand why males give such lecherous looks to females.

Why even an ugly girl, falls victim to rape.

Why women suspected of infidelity face such dire consequences.

Why man go crazy after striptease shows, why the cheapest of films with nothing but exposure go 'House-Full'. Why rapes, molestation etc. are increasing. Just as a poor man craves for wealth and jumps at the sight of it, is willing to do anything for it, so males crave for the female body and go to any length to get hold of it.

However, Guruji,

I don't understand one thing

It is like the outcome of the Home

'Foreign-Affairs'.

A worse situation has arisen now that women have left the 'home' and entered other spheres.

The 'home' is now a mere 'house'.

Women have fallen prey to other men and not managed to preserve their 'purity'.

Again, with a whole set of new problems on their mind, their relationship with

Introduction

In the world-renowned epic 'Ramayana' the long war, the death of thousands and all the following miseries, had at its inception just a slight 'slip', slight 'error' by Queen Sita, the wife of kind Rama.

In spite of being warned against crossing a border line drawn by prince Laxman, Queen Sita put just one foot outside the line, that to give alms to a Sadhu. This one momentary slip, was sufficient to bring about the Queen's downfall, capture at the hands of Ravana and untold misery in the kingdom.

This is the price that has to be paid for crossing the 'line of control' - for entering.

- Acharya Vijay Ratnasundersuri

LECTURE ON WOMEN AND JAINISM AT MUMBAI UNIVERSITY

There is a course on Jainism that runs in the Mumbai University. I got a chance to attend the lecture on Women and Jainism taught by Prof. Shilpa Chedda. She spoke about the differences in women's roles and status in both the sects of Jainism. She also mentioned how Jain history like the history of other religions speaks about women in privileged positions like Tirthankars' mothers, wives, daughters, disciples. But there is never a mention of the lay women in the lower rungs of society. One important detail she mentioned was that Jainism was the first religion to define a woman. Every person is identified based on two things which are Dravya (i.e. Gender) and Bhava (i.e. Temperament). So a person can physically be a man but by temperament can be a woman and vice versa. This enlists that there are four types of people: Dravya stree - Bhava stree, Dravya stree - Bhava Purush, Dravya Purush - Bhava stree and Bhava Purush - Dravya Purush.

A Bhava stree is said to be dainty, fickle minded, physically weaker, frivolous, caring, etc. While a Bhava Purush is the opposite i.e. they are mentally and physically strong, have a strong concentration power, mentally more stable, etc. So all the women leaders, women in the history of Jainism will be defined as Dravya stree - Bhava Purush.

There was also a discussion on the access to scriptures issue. Prof. Shilpa said that it is not just about reading and remembering the scriptures that takes you on the path of salvation. People practice years of Yog and dedicate their time to studying these scriptures. You also have to know Sanskrit and Prakrit language in its original form. And since women are considered fickle minded they are said to find it difficult to read the scriptures if they are allowed to.

Through this lecture I realised that there is a secondary status given to the idea of being a woman. Even women leaders are not given complete credit for being women. They are defined as Bhava Purush. So if a woman is not Bhava Purush she is considered mentally weak which gives a negative connotation to the idea of being a woman.



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SCIENCE AND JAIN PHILOSOPHY

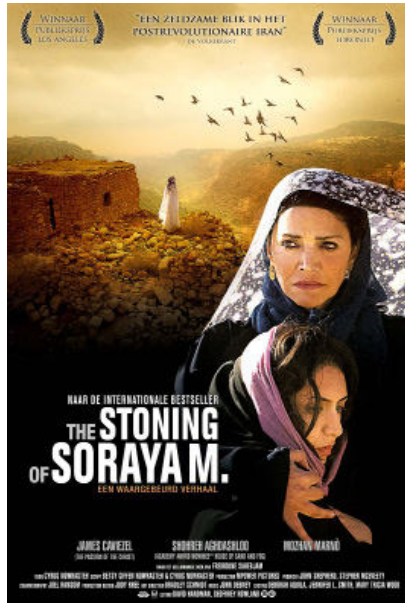
I got a chance to attend the International Conference on Science and Jain Philosophy which was held at IIT Bombay. It was a great conference with people across various fields in attendance - there were spiritual leaders, professors, students, business men and women, doctors, psychologists. The conference followed a standard format of paper presentations followed by a round of question and answers.

There was clearly a very low representation of women speakers at the conference. Even during the Q&A very few women stood up and asked questions. This showed that we have a long way to go before our women are confident enough to stand up in front of such a large audience and give a paper presentation or ask questions.



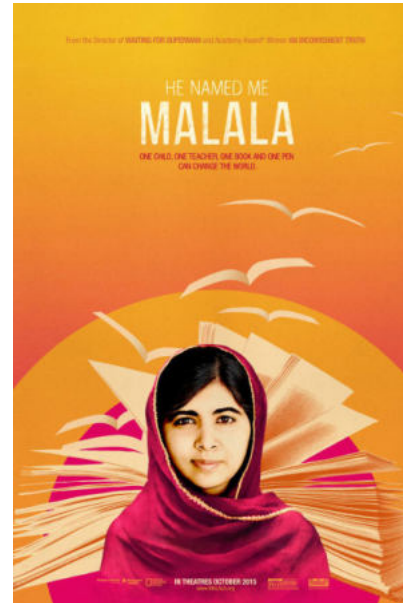
FILM REVIEW

An organisation called Osianama had organised a film festival to celebrate womanhood. As a part of this festival I got to attend a few movie screenings. The movies I saw were:



The Stoning of Soraya M. by Cyrus Nowrasteh

This movie was based on a real life incident which was captured in a book. The movie revolves around the story of Soraya who is falsely accused of adultery by her husband because he wants a way out of his marriage to get married to a 14 year old girl. Soraya was convicted and buried upto her waist and stoned to death by the villagers including her husband, sons and father.



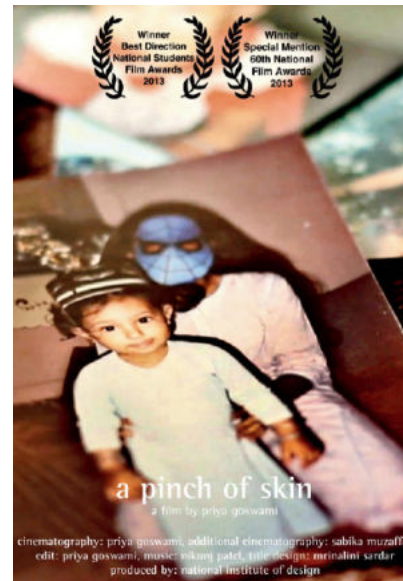
He named me Malala by Davis Guggenheim

This was a documentary on the youngest Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai. The movie showed her journey from being a child, to the incident where she was shot by the Taliban. to her activism and her daily life as a teenager struggling with her studies. The movie also talks about her father's contribution to her immense strength and will power.



Matrubhoomi
by Manish Jha

This film takes a jab at female foeticide. It depicts a future dystopia in an Indian village populated exclusively by males due to female foeticide over the years. This movie was a gory film but extremely hard hitting and left an impact on me way after the movie was over.



A Pinch of Skin
by Priya Goswami

This was a short documentary on the practise of 'Khatna' which is genital mutilation. Khatna is practiced in the Bohri Muslim community. The documentary showed different perspectives of women from the community in different age groups. This was the film that came closest to what I wanted to do. It handled an issue that was prevalent in a particular community. At the end the film does leave one questioning the practise.



Oass
by Abhinav Tiwari

This was a film that dealt with human trafficking specially child prostitution. It was based on a real life story of a young Nepalese girl who was sold to the brothel by her aunt.



The World before her
by Nisha Pahuja

Apart from the film festival. I also saw this documentary. It follows the path of two young women in today's India. Both going through their own set of struggles, both with their dreams - one who wants to win the Miss India title and another who is a part of a radical Hindu group prepared to kill and die for her beliefs. This movie doesn't feed an opinion to you but lets you question both the perspectives.

SELECTION OF MEDIUM

Since the aim of the project is to initiate a dialogue in the community, I decided to go with audio-visual medium for the final output. Audio-visual is the medium that has the most potential to reach out to a larger audience.

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

After the medium was finalised, I started brainstorming on the possible approaches for the audio-visual. I came down to three approaches.

Approach 1

A documentary on the different issues that women face in the community. There would be people across different age groups and gender reacting to the issues. The idea was to see if people even have an opinion on these issues and if they do, what are they. Professional opinion would also be taken into consideration. For example a doctor will be consulted for the issue of menstruation.

Approach 2

A fictional story based on the journey of a person who has faced prejudices growing up, fought them and risen above. There were two lines of thought in this approach. One was to take my own story, since I come from a traditional Jain family - how have I dealt with these issues over the years. The other was to take my father's story into consideration. He comes from a very traditional orthodox family where patriarchy was in practice. He changed over the years and has brought up 3 independent daughters who are capable of questioning things that are happening around them.

Approach 3

Mix of fiction and documentary. The idea was to use the story of change, where dialogue has resulted into a positive change and making people watch that story and letting them react to it. And then raise questions related to the issues women face.

Approach 4

A sarcastic take on the everyday prejudices faced by women in the community. This would be a young girl's take on various issues.

ISSUE WITH DIFFERENT APPROACHES AND THE FINAL OUTCOME

Once I started elaborating on the ideas I realised that each of them had their own set of issues. I was going to have real people reacting to issues in the first approach. There was a very strong chance that people watching the film will have pre conceived image in their mind about the person. They would already form a judgement based on the age, gender, economic background, place of residence (rural or urban) and so on. This would create a bias hinder the dialogue.

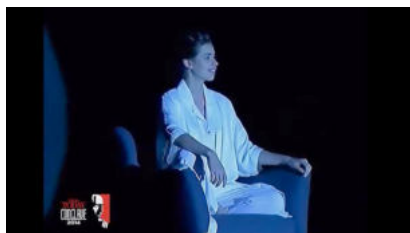
In the second approach I was trying to compare the stories of two Jain families. One where there was an open dialogue about issues and the other where there was a clear patriarchal system in place. I was trying to show the two families as a progressive and a regressive family respectively. But when I was writing the story I realised that I was not in a position to tell someone else that their approach to life and bringing up their children is wrong and what I am saying is correct. Every person has a choice to choose their own path.

I was finding it very difficult to not let the stories be misinterpreted as male bashing stories. The current phase of feminism in India is unfortunately not very good. Most people end up taking all the articles and videos on feminism in the negative way. This dismisses the original purpose of the content which is to stand up equality. The first three approaches were thus dumped.

I decided to go with the final outcome as that was a sarcastic take on the issues faced by women in their everyday lives. This included lay women as well as nuns. Once I decided that this was the way to go, I started looking for content which was similar in nature and I came across Spoken Word Poetry.

SPOKEN WORD POETRY

When I was looking up at work done related to feminism I came across the art form of Spoken Word Poetry. Spoken Word Poetry is an oral art that focuses on the aesthetics of word play and intonation and voice inflection. It mixes theatre and poetry. Many spoken word artists have used this art form to raise awareness about feminism and they are very impactful and effective in the communication of the issue. The four performances that stood out for me were:



Kalki Koechlin's 'Just Another Rant'

Kalki is a famous Indian actress who has been vocal about the issues of women and identifies herself as a feminist. She performed a solo speech titled 'Just Another Rant' at the 13th India Today Conclave. In it, Kalki speaks about how the dimensions of patriarchy have affected our society.



Deepika Padukone's 'My Choice'

Deepika is also a famous Indian actress who was a part of the video produced by vogue called 'My Choice' which spoke about different issues where women are usually suppressed or are forced to follow a decision made by someone else for them. This video garnered a lot of attention - positive as well as negative. But it did start a dialogue in the society.



Kalki Koechlin and Juhi Pandey's 'It's your fault'

This video, produced by AIB (All India Bakchod) made a commentary on the current rape situation in the country. Victim blaming is a very big issue in India. Even the people in powerful positions make statements that support victim blaming. This is a sarcastic take on the whole situation.



Sarah Kay's 'If I should have a daughter'

Sarah Kay is a famous Spoken Word Poet who performs at various events. Her performances range from the topics of friendship, love to feminism. This performance is addressed to her unborn daughter.

All these performances were very powerful and have been effective in creating a dialogue. Spoken Word Poetry was thus the form of communication I chose to go forward with.

FINAL POEM

Once I finalised the form of communication to be Spoken Word Poetry, I started writing the poem. This was my first attempt ever at writing a poem. So apart from making the poem effective I also had to overcome personal barriers of self doubt.

I began by listing down the issues that I thought needed attention. I tried covering issues that a girl faces everyday since she is child. Most of the instances were drawn from my own life where I was told to sit properly, chew softly, cover up because I am a girl. Menstruation was another very important issue that needed attention and I tried bringing that up as well. Even a trivial issue like covering ones head while entering the temple was addressed because even if it is an insignificant problem compared to other bigger problems - it defines how a society treats its women. I have tried addressing issues that nuns face and how Mallinath Bhagwan was also not spared from the Karmic bondage.

The poem is addressed to the society and not the religion as a lot of the issues that women face today are societal.

The poem has three characters:

1. A young Jain girl - Main Character
2. Society - represented by a man
3. Mother of the young girl

After I had presented the first draft of the poem, I got a feedback that there is no counter argument happening in the poem. That's where the character of 'Society' came in. The mother represents all the people who have constantly told the young girl what to do all her life.

(Most lines in the poem are said by the young girl. The Society's lines are in **bold** and the mother's lines are in **colour**.)

Dear Society,

I am writing this letter to tell you how privileged I feel to be born in a community that is so progressive. We are, after all, one of the most educated communities in the country, we have made our mark in almost all professions. We live good quality lives.

We also contribute to a significant portion of the GDP despite being a very small part of the population.

Right, and we are also a community that takes pride in treating its women right.

Let me get straight to the point.

There have been times when I have been told to behave right.

sit properly, cover up, cross your legs, chew softly, talk properly.

I always wondered why my brother was never told to do this. And I was constantly reminded that

You are a girl, act like one.

I don't even know what that means.

But I am thankful, thankful that you at least let me live. This is just a small price I have to pay for not getting killed.

Dear Society,

By the time I was 11 and had started bleeding between my legs, I was treated

like an untouchable, an impure being, because I would disturb the sanctity of everything.

Do not enter the kitchen, do not go to the Derasar, sit aside, eat from a separate plate, drink from a separate bottle.

I wanted to scream and cry
But all I could do was go to the corner and lie.

I get it - I am privileged, privileged to be able to bear a human being in my belly, even if it means I have to put a noose around my independence, even if it means I have to let my freedom go by.

Every time I go to the Derasar to pray, I have to cover my head.

Yes, as a sign of respect. Men are supposed to remove their caps and women are supposed to cover their heads.

I wish that was the only reason I was told to do so. But no, I get told that I will distract a man, disrupt his concentration and disturb his prayer, with my thick luscious hair, because men have 'eyes' and they will stare.

But thank you, thank you for at least letting me in and pray to my heart's content. Some women are not even entitled to that privilege.

Talking about privileges, it is said that it is a woman's privilege to be able to feed her family. It is assumed that cooking comes naturally to me and that I am good at it.

But if you don't cook, how would you feed your kids, how would they know what Jain food is?

If I don't help out mom and dadi in the kitchen - how would I learn how to make round rotis and 10 types of rice dishes? It doesn't matter how much I have studied, how good a person I am, if I don't make round rotis, no one would want to marry me because I am the one responsible for feeding the kids.

Did I just mention studies? Right. We boast of being the most literate community in the country. We educate not just our men, but also our women.

But god forbid if a woman ever questions a tradition, ever questions a ritual, ever questions our scriptures.

She will face the 'log kya kahenge' from her family, she will be branded a rebel, she will be called names because she dared.

Our educated daughter is our trophy that we take pride in showing off. Just keep it to that. We educated you not just to make you a good person or to serve the society, but also to increase your chances of finding a match in the bazaar that is marriage.

As much as this angers me, believe me marriage is not supposed to be my ultimate goal in life. According to our religion, my ultimate goal should be liberation, liberation of the soul from the body, from emotions, from all the earthly attachments that bind me.

But half my religion doesn't believe I am capable of achieving even that. Half my religion says I am fickle minded, I am impure, I kill micro organisms when I bleed, I cannot be naked and detach myself from clothing.

And for all these fickle and frivolous reasons my soul is not worthy of being liberated.

If you roam around naked, you will always be scared for your life and you will also distract a man from his tapascharya. Why do something that jeopardises both your wellbeing?

You are right, I am responsible for my own deeds. I will do good karma in this birth to become a man in my next birth and then walk the path to liberation, all over again.

But who am I to question anything?

Even God was not spared. Mallinath Bhagwan, the 19th Tirthankar, became a woman only because of her bad Karma in the previous birth.

Knowing that even God had to bear the repercussions of his bad karma, I am sure I did something really bad to have deserved this birth of a woman.

And I am a fool to believe I have a tough life. Sadhvis who renounce all earthly attachments are not spared either.

They still remain impure, they still cannot read all the scriptures which means they can never be the Acharya or the ultimate leader. They have to bow down to every sadhu even if he is of a lower rank in the hierarchy, sit on lower ground compared to a sadhu at every function, give a sermon only when there is no sadhu to do so.

And half the religion still maintains that they cannot achieve liberation because they are women.

I get it - I am always going to be someone's daughter, mother, sister, wife, niece and never an individual with her own dreams.

I get it - It is bad if I question anything, because I am a woman, that is not what I am supposed to do. I am supposed to have a tough skin, smile and take it all in.

Because it is my bad karma which has brought me here.

It is my bad karma which has made me a woman.

FINAL PERFORMANCE

As mentioned before, Spoken Word Poetry mixes theatre and poetry. The final outcome of my project will thus be a pre-recorded performance of a young girl performing the poem with supporting visuals in a video format.

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