

Review of Manisha Sethi, *Escaping the World. Women Renouncers among Jains (South Asian History and Culture)*, New Delhi/London: Routledge 2012, xxvi + 240 pp., 12 Black and White Plates, 6 Figures, 4 Tables, ISBN 978-0-415-50081-4

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Jainism is probably one of the most fascinating Indian religions and has been arousing an increased interest from different angles in the last decades. Born in Eastern India in the 6th century BC, it has had a long and rich history and is present until today through approximately five millions followers in India and as a diaspora outside India. Since its origin, the Jains have been organised as a four-fold community (*sangha*) composed of monks and nuns living as wandering mendicants without possessions on the one hand, and male and female lay followers whose main role is to support monks and nuns in their daily life. All along the Jains have addressed gender issues and provided original answers to the status of women in their community. This issue is also at the heart of the sectarian differentiation between the Shvetambaras and the Digambaras, who represent, until today, the two main groups among the Jains: according to the former, one can reach liberation from karma and rebirth as a woman, while the latter hold that being reborn as a man is a prerequisite. Statistics from early scriptures and contemporary evidence both show that nuns (*sadhvis*) have always largely outnumbered monks. This kind of anomaly is in contrast with other Indian religious traditions where female renouncers are absent or in very small numbers. The numerical preponderance of nuns (here ‘female renouncers’) over monks is the puzzling question that the author addresses with a feminist perspective in the book under review. Indeed, this is a fact, but only among Shvetambaras – and this precision should be stated more clearly. Among Digambaras, nuns are very few, and their small number is partly connected with the Digambaras’ restrictive view excluding women as such from spiritual emancipation from rebirth.

Investigations relating to the place of women in Jainism have now an academic history as several surveys or monographs taking the topic from different angles have appeared, mainly in the West during the two last decades. Manisha Sethi has largely used them in her monograph, rendering justice to existing scholarship, especially in Chapter 3, 'Nuns and Temptresses: Representing Women in Jainism', where she explores the textual traditions in the form of prescriptive texts and monastic rules but also stories, which, in India, play an important role in the construction and dissemination of values. Her personal contribution emerges mainly in the results of the fieldwork she has done in North India (Delhi, Jaipur, Faridabad and Gurgaon, 2012: 13) which is the source for her observations and arguments. As a woman speaking Hindi, she had direct access to the 65 nuns she interviewed, with questionnaires and 'conversations' or 'chatty discussions' (2012: 16). Her panel is fairly representative, although it does not allow generalisations as the situation of nuns diverges depending on monastic orders and regional factors. As a non-Jain, she was in a good position to ask freely intriguing questions. As a woman with expertise in sociological and anthropological approaches she had the theoretical frame to interpret the first-hand information. Ample space is given to the *sadhvi's* voices which are heard directly through quotations, similes and their expressive and spontaneous language (2012: 99, 127). The analysis of the Hindi biographies of two Shvetambara Sthanakvasi prominent nuns (Mahasati Shri Umarkanwar and Mahasati Kesari Devi) is a welcome addition to the interviews and illustrates 'idealised lives' (Chapter 6). All this empirical material is set against sociological theories about female renunciation (Chapter 2), emphasising how renunciation is a challenge for Indian women, because household life with responsibilities as wife and mother is conceived as an ideal for her in Indian societies, with the result that active role in spiritual improvement (what Sethi calls 'soteriological agency', 2012: 28) is generally denied to her.

Jainism, however, is different. At the same time, the author rightly states that there is a 'need to push beyond the conception of separate categories' (2012: 38). She rightly underlines how in the Jain context there is a 'continuity between the *samsaric* (that is, worldly) and spiritual families' (2012: 103ff) and how the kin networks are perpetuated in monastic communities – something true for monks and nuns alike. Indeed, the Jain nun becomes part of a network of relations with other mendicants and with the laity that are structured in a well-organised system (Chapter 5, 'Ethics of Care: Individual and the Institutional') implying various modes of reciprocity and support which are described convincingly.

The main notions are those of 'agency and choice' (2012: 9). Sethi is not the first one to observe that difficulties of woman's life in the Indian context are not the only reasons for her to become a *sadhvi*. Widowhood, for example, is not a main motivation, and today there are several young ladies who decide for renunciation in their teens. A vivid account (p. 98) rightly shows how they have to struggle and oppose their families. It could be compared with Jain story literature of the past, which provides ample evidence to this, or with the 'Nun's tale' narrated by William Dalrymple (*Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, London: Bloomsbury 2009). Detachment from worldly life (*vairagya*, 2012: 100) is a very special moment which has to be understood against an environment where death is omnipresent and is a tangible reality. Moreover in the Indian context youngsters brought up in religious families are often in direct

contact with legends and teaching mendicants who, as interviews and reports largely show, make an enduring impression on their minds. Further, *sadhvis* often express how life as a nun encourages their self-development (2012: 115, 117). In short, they emphasise the positive aspect of their motivations in what they see as a personal choice. In this respect, the title of Sethi's book 'escaping the world' is misleading. It introduces a kind of negative note which is slightly regrettable and does not fully conform to her own demonstration or view (2012: 9).

Indeed, it is clear, as Sethi also shows, that asceticism is culturally valued for women in the Jain context, and that it is an organised system which provides an adequate alternative and environment for them to live. This environment is partly a reproduction of the social norms, with patriarchal dominancy, and partly a subversion of these norms. Her investigation makes use of the notions of sexism and feminism, but in between the lines, one sees that they are partly inadequate and irrelevant to the *sadhvis* and do not belong to their own conceptions. Having decided for nun's lives does not mean that these women are against established views about woman's inferiority, which could be termed misogynic, or that they reject the need for women to be subjected to more rules than men, as the Jain codes do. A Jain nun, one could argue, does not necessarily feel that she lives in oppression because she is subordinated to a hierarchy of monks; she does not necessarily feel the refusal of femininity or female body, implied by renunciation, as a constraint, but on the contrary may see it as an element of liberation and spiritual progress. There is indeed a multiplicity of attitudes on these issues among the *sadhvis* themselves. The final sentence of the book seems to resonate restrictively:

In the end, the very legitimacy of the institution of female asceticism, and the way in which the samaj [society] upholds it and sustains it renders female asceticism into a socially approved institution. Vairagins [renouncers] do not have to militate against social norms to be able to take diksha [religious initiation] – they have to convince all of the truth and strength of their vairagya [detachment] (2012: 220).

Indeed, Jain *sadhvis* live within a system. The question is rather, as the whole book shows, how this system manages to give or to deny them a role.

This is a highly recommendable monograph, well-structured and written in a lively and flowing style which makes both informative and pleasant reading, supported by aptly selected visual material (photographs and tables). Not everything is new in it. The ethnographic material, the possibility to listen to *sadhvi*'s voices and the qualified approach of a situation which is complex and does not lend itself to oversimplification are strong points. A thought-provoking book, it has been at the centre of a roundtable at the 2012 November meeting of the American Academy of Religion where three American woman scholars who have themselves written on women in Jainism challenged some of its arguments (see report in *Jaina Studies: Newsletter of the Centre of Jaina Studies*, SOAS University of London, No. 8, March 2013, 14–15; <http://www.soas.ac.uk/jainastudies/newsletter/file83045.pdf>). Sethi's exploration undoubtedly offers solid ground for further discussions on gender construction in non-Western contexts.