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# FOOD AND IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG JAIN LAYWOMEN

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**FOOD AND IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG JAIN LAYWOMEN**

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Fall 2014

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**Abstract**

The Jains are a small but influential minority community in India. Their religion is structured around the concept of *ahimsa*, the strict adherence to nonviolence in one's every undertaking. The ideal Jain diet does the least amount of harm to both oneself and one's environment, including plants and microscopic organisms. Many foods—including meat, honey, alcohol, and underground vegetables—are forbidden. While Jain philosophy is adamant about avoiding foods that are obtained through violence, it says little about the perspectives and lifestyles of those most often charged with maintaining this diet: Jain laywomen. Because these women are the primary chefs of Jain cuisine, they are especially affected by the implications of upholding the traditions of a minority community.

Through a series of interviews and observations focused around the topic of Jain women and cooking, this paper uncovers the deeper relationship that these women hold with their food. It argues that women are especially affected by the power of the restrictive Jain diet as it constructs their religious and gendered identities. It is especially interested in how eating and cooking Jain food can be interpreted as a performance of piety, control, purity, and modernity amongst these women. By investigating these topics, I attempt to answer a deeper question of how culinary traditions can serve to preserve and proclaim identity amongst minority groups, and how women fit into this cultural conservation. I aim to convince the reader of the essential relationship that religion, gender, and food share as modes of reaffirming identity.

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## *Introduction*

Where do we most often encounter religion? While some may argue that churches and temples remain God's sole places of residence, some scholars have started to look to the kitchen and the dining table as spaces of spiritual expression. It cannot be denied that many religions share a special relationship with food. The individual often experiences food in conjunction with spiritual experiences: receiving food can be a part of ritual, delicious holiday meals become inseparable from the religious events that they honor, and images of tasting and fulfilling one's hunger are scattered across a variety of sacred texts. Sometimes it is the abstention from certain foods that defines the culinary-spiritual experience. Our bodies are made a microcosm of the sacred, a temple in which sin—taking the form of non-kosher foods, non-*halal* meats, or non-vegetarian cuisine—is forbidden for fear of pollution.

The intimacy between religion and dietary restriction is especially poignant for women. As many religions have histories of propagating ideas of women as destined for the domestic, female devotees become entrenched in the politics of food, religion, and providing the family with ample doses of both. When dietary restrictions are emphasized as part of the religious canon, communities can utilize these rules to further control a woman's practice and body. On the other hand, establishing the female devotee as the first line of defense against culinary sin gives her a new sense of theological power and purpose. The relationship between gender, food, and religion is certainly a complicated one.

Perhaps no community knows this as well as the Jains, whose identity is based on the rejection of many "sinful" foods. Jain laywomen are especially involved in the cooking and consumption of this restrictive diet. Their identities are thus even more closely linked to food. This paper intends to explore and expand upon the ways that Jain diet shapes Jain women's

religious and gendered identities. Using both textual and ethnographic research, the present study details the many kinds of empowerment and subservience that Jain women experience in conjunction with following a strict Jain diet. Ultimately, the influence of food on Jain women's identities was examined based on its use in performances of religiosity, gendered expectations, bodily purity, and scientific modernity. Cooking is seen as more than just an everyday task for Jain women, but also a way in which they strive to preserve and perform their minority culture. As sectarian tensions flare, it becomes more important to investigate how space can be made for the continued survival of such minority groups.

### ***A Brief Introduction to Jainism***

#### **An Overview of the History of Jainism**

It is impossible to pinpoint the exact beginning of Jainism. Its origins can be pieced together through a mix of tradition and textual evidence. Jainism views time as a cyclical entity that guides mankind through periods of growth and decline. Many Jains believe that the origin of their religion in the present age coincides with the rule of Rishabha (also called Adinath), the founder of human civilization and the first *tirthankar*. The *tirthankars* were mortals who gained omniscience (*kevala-jnana*) through contemplation and asceticism.<sup>1</sup> Today, the *tirthankars* serve as the central figures of Jain theology and worship. Their divine status is sometimes compared to that of gods. However, *tirthankars* are regarded as beings that have transcended the physical world, and therefore they cannot respond to the wishes and prayers of worshippers.<sup>2</sup> *Tirthankars* are also referred to as *gurus* or *jinās*, the latter title extolling their success in conquering the material plane and the temptations of the senses.

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<sup>1</sup> Vilas A. Sangave. *Aspects of Jaina Religion* (New Delhi: Bharatiya Jnanpith, 2001), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Shakuntala Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 11, 2014.



The first *tirthankar* who can be reliably located in history is Parshvanatha (877-777 BCE).<sup>3</sup> Though Jains consider him a Jain reformer rather than the religion's founder, Parshvanatha is still regarded as one of the religion's most revered and beloved figures. A prince from eastern India, Parshvanatha gained omniscience after forgoing the royal life for that of a wandering ascetic. After obtaining *kevala-jnana* through a long period of meditation, he became the twenty-third and penultimate *tirthankar*. A popular *guru*, Parshvanatha is said to have played an instrumental role in spreading Jainism. His religious order totaled over 500,000 members,<sup>4</sup> all of whom were taught the principles of nonviolence and asceticism. Parshvanatha thus established and consolidated the basic principles of the Jain order that would later be expanded upon by his successor, the final *tirthankar*.

Mahavira (599-527 BCE)<sup>5</sup>, the last *tirthankar*, followed Parshvanatha's example as a Jain reformer and popular *guru*. Born to royal and pious *Kshatriya* parents, Mahavira's birth was marked by much celebration in both the divine and the mundane realms.<sup>6</sup> Mahavira later rejected his life of splendor and began wandering as a naked monk immediately after the death of his parents. Mahavira gained omniscience after a two-and-a-half day fast during which he consumed neither food nor drink. As a *jina*, Mahavira solidified Jain philosophy and cosmology into a coherent canon of essential beliefs and practices. Mahavira is notable for establishing the Five Great Vows, Jain ideals that are viewed as necessary for the attainment of omniscience and *moksha*.<sup>7</sup> His teachings are the subject of much Jain literature such as the *agamas*, an expansive set of forty-six texts that detail Jain philosophy. He introduced the nine *tattvas* into Jain philosophy, a set of principles that detail the nature of the soul, *karma*, and the achievement of

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<sup>3</sup> Sangave, *Aspects of Jaina Religion*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Jacobi. *The Golden Book of Jainism* (New Delhi: Lotus Press, 2008), 237.

<sup>5</sup> Sangave, *Aspects of Jaina Religion*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Jacobi, *The Golden Book of Jainism*, 224.

<sup>7</sup> Jacobi, *The Golden Book of Jainism*, 28.

*moksha*.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the teachings of both Mahivra and Parshvanatha coincide with the composition of many of the *Upanishads* (800-400 BCE), philosophical texts that are now often considered part of the Hindu canon. The wisdoms of both Buddhist and Jain leaders during the sixth century BCE are said to have influenced the *Upanishads*' rejection of animal sacrifice and doctrine of monism of the soul.<sup>9</sup> Mahavira was a crucial figure in the shaping of Jain religion—and perhaps even Hindu religion—as it appears today. After his death, he left the Jain religion with the philosophical foundation that inspires the practices of abstention, diligence, and absolute nonviolence common among both Jain monks and laypeople.

Following Mahavira's death, Jainism became an influential religion among the east and south Indian elite.<sup>10</sup> In the first century of the Common Era, Jainism was divided into two sects that formed their own distinct beliefs, practices, and spheres of influence.<sup>11</sup> Known as the Great Schism, this split produced the two Jain denominations that encompass most practitioners today: the *Shvetambar* and *Digambar* orders. The division was instigated by differing views on asceticism, gender, and the body. *Shvetambar* Jains maintain that ascetics can retain their clothing and cover themselves with white robes. Male monks and female nuns are equal in their capacity to attain *moksha*. *Digambar* Jains argue that the highest order of ascetics must abandon all clothing and wander about in the nude, subjecting their bodies to discomfort and removing all attachment. Jain nuns cannot expose their nakedness without becoming an object of temptation, and are thereby forbidden from entering the highest *Digambar* orders and attaining *moksha*. Additionally, the two sects differ on their acceptance of canonical texts, with *Shvetambars*

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<sup>8</sup> Hirlal Jain, "Jainism: It's History, Principles, and Precepts," in *Studies in Jainism*, 1st ed. (Kolkata: The Rama Krishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2002), 15.

<sup>9</sup> James Gaffney, "Eastern Religions and the Eating of Meat" in *Food For Thought: The Debate Over Eating Meat*, 1st ed., (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2004), 226.

<sup>10</sup> Sangave, *Aspects of Jaina Religion*, 112-118.

<sup>11</sup> Jain, *Jains in India and Abroad*, 7.

regarding the *agmas* and *sutras* as accurately reflective of Mahavira's teachings and *Digambara* maintaining that the original texts of Mahavira were lost long ago.<sup>12</sup> As the centuries passed, the differences between the two sects solidified and also produced sub-sects that propagated their own beliefs and traditions.

Following the Great Schism at the start of the Common Era, Jainism gained power in western India.<sup>13</sup> Pre-Mughal north India was a hostile climate for Jains, who often witnessed the destruction of their temples or the conversion of their holy sites into mosques.<sup>14</sup> However, Jains in Mughal-controlled north India found patronage and support within the court of Akbar. In a manner similar to the other Indian dynasties, Jains found their way into official positions that garnered them favor and power among the rulers. Akbar was so influenced by such officials that he issued an edict forbidding animal slaughter during the Jain festival of *Paryushana* throughout the empire in 1583 CE. While the strong economic position of the Jains afforded them some privileges throughout Muslim rule, in “the political scenario of Mughal India, financial superiority did not entail political decision-making...the Jain mercantile magnets could have never imagined sharing the power of Mughal royalty or influencing its decisions in the larger context.”<sup>15</sup> Large communities of Jains moved to Rajput-controlled states during this time, a migration that places many contemporary Jains within the borders of Rajasthan.<sup>16</sup> Today, the extremely large amount of Rajasthani vegetarian cuisine is attributed in part to this influx of Jains into the state.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sangave, *Aspects of Jaina Religion*, 102.

<sup>13</sup> Sangave, *Aspects of Jaina Religion*, 118-122.

<sup>14</sup> Sangave, *Aspects of Jaina Religion*, 128.

<sup>15</sup> Shalin Jain. “Piety, Laity and Royalty: Jains under the Mughals in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century,” 89.

<sup>16</sup> Sangave, *Aspects of Jaina Religion*, 122.

<sup>17</sup> K. T. Achaya, *Indian Food: A Historical Companion*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 140.

The advent of the British Raj saw new challenges for the Jains, many of which concerned the reclaiming and restructuring of communal identity. The British census of India oft supplied the empire with confusing and conflicting data, as “families could identify themselves as alternately Jain or Hindu according to personal choices related to marriage, religious participation, and business linkages in changing social and historical circumstances.”<sup>18</sup> The demographics of Jains provided by these censuses would vary widely: Jains and Hindus would often be conflated because of “the preconceptions of the census enumerators and their insistence on the necessity of a religious categorization.”<sup>19</sup> Within the last several decades after the dissolution of the British Raj, discomfort with a lack of separate Jain identity manifested in ethnic revivalism.<sup>20</sup> The 1990’s and 2000’s saw the bid for Jain minority status under the Central Government, which was finally granted to the community in 2014. The 2001 Indian census, which saw a 26% decadal growth rate from the previous census, reflected the increasing tendency for Jains to cling to their religious identity as a distinct Indian indigenous tradition. Public proclamations of Jain identity were encouraged by several Jain organizations, maintaining a sense of cultural urgency among the laity. The present study is concerned with a community currently at the crossroads of reclaiming its history and reestablishing itself as a separate religion amidst a century-long conflation with Hinduism.

### **Demographics and Characteristics of Contemporary Jain Communities**

As of the 2011 Indian census, the Jain community comprises .4% of India’s population, making them one of the smallest religious communities in the country.<sup>21</sup> They are concentrated in the western India states of Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Gujarat. The Jain community is

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<sup>18</sup> Anne Hardgrove, 'Community and Public Culture: The Marwaris in Calcutta 1897-1997'. (Gutenberg-E: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Paul Dundas, *The Jains*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Jain, *Jains in India and Abroad*, 122-124.

<sup>21</sup> Jain, *Jains in India and Abroad*, 49, 54, 56, 80, 62, 67.

extremely urbanized, with the vast majority of the community residing in cities rather than in rural areas. Jains are less likely to be employed in the agricultural sectors than other religious groups, with only 15% of Jains identifying as cultivators or agricultural laborers. Additionally, the Jain community has extremely high literacy and male work participation rates at 94.1% and 55.2% respectively, the highest of any Indian community. While the Jains are a tiny fraction of Indian society, their unique status as a highly urbanized and highly educated group allows them to exert a large influence over the culture.

Any study of contemporary Jain culture would be incomplete if it failed to acknowledge the close relationship between class and Jainism perceived by both insiders and outsiders of the religion. While one cannot assume that all Jains identify as wealthy, upper-middle class, or middle-class, a disproportionately high number of Jains in India fall into these “conspicuously successful communities.”<sup>22</sup> The reasons for the relative wealth of this community can only be speculated; some argue that business and commerce were established as ideal occupations by Jain philosophical doctrines because they involved less violence to animals and plants than agriculture.<sup>23</sup> From ancient to colonial times, Jains were often referred to as *Baniyas*, a Rajasthani term for a group of merchant castes.<sup>24</sup> *Baniya* has since taken on negative connotations associated with greed and weakness. Indeed, some may have trouble reckoning the wealth of the Jain community with its ideals of asceticism and renunciation. It is hard to imagine that the naked, destitute monks of Jain reverence are followers of the same *dharm* as affluent Jain businessmen. The Jain laity navigates these connections by blending the ideology of *moksha-marg* with that of worldly wellbeing, defined in this study as “health, wealth, mental

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<sup>22</sup> James Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Kristi L. Wiley, *The A to Z of Jainism*, (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 162.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Whitney Kelting, *Heroic Wives*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

peace, emotional contentment, and satisfaction in one's worldly endeavors."<sup>25</sup> The two seemingly opposite realms are made interdependent on each other through the application and molding of Jain ideology to the realities of lived experience. Diet is one such vehicle that allows Jains to merge spiritual ideals with the pleasures of wellbeing in the material world.

### *The Philosophy and the Flavor: Qualities of the Jain Diet*

#### **Jain Philosophy and its Impact on Cuisine**

"*Ahimsa* is everyday life."<sup>26</sup> A conversation with a Jain devotee illustrates the immense power sacred ideology holds over her ideals for practical living. All of the Jains involved in this study mentioned *ahimsa* (broadly defined as abstention from violence towards all creatures) as a central tenet of their beliefs. In Jain philosophy, *ahimsa* is the first Great Vow of Mahavira and the essential principle from which all other Jain dogmas are derived. By extolling *ahimsa* ancient Jains directly challenged the pre-*Upanishadic* Vedic religion's penchant for animal sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> Jain holy texts encourage followers to refrain from killing any living being, causing another person to kill a living being, consenting to killing living beings, physically harming any living being, and emotionally distressing any living being. Jains today often continue to avoid violence at all costs, especially in their dietary choices. Practicing *ahimsa* is also sometimes used as a justification for promoting healthy eating, as some Jains include harm to oneself as an act of violence.<sup>28</sup> Jain cuisine is characterized by a strict adherence to *ahimsa* that excludes not only non-vegetarian foods from their dinner tables, but some fruits and vegetables as well.

To the non-Jain, it may seem strange that the consumption of plant-based products could be considered a violent act. However the application of *ahimsa* to these foods is plausible in the

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<sup>25</sup> John E. Cort, *Jains in the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Sunayana Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 6, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> V. K. Sharma, *History of Jainism*, (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2002), 64.

<sup>28</sup> Shugan Jain, conversation with K.C. McConnell, October 10, 2014.

context of the religion's conception of the soul. The nine *tattvas* of Jainism assert that the world is comprised of two types of matter: that which possesses a soul (*jiva*) and that which does not possess a soul (*ajiva*).<sup>29</sup> Humans, animals, insects,<sup>30</sup> plants, and microscopic organisms are all believed to possess a soul. Harming any of these *jivas* is considered sinful in Jain religion.

However, Jain texts do classify *jivas* in terms of the number of senses they possess, arguing that violence caused to a one-sensed being is a lesser evil than harming a more advanced being. Still, the ideal of *ahimsa* demands Jains to avoid violence to any *jiva* when at all possible. Thus, Jains avoid certain vegetables and fruits because harvesting them may necessitate the killing of a plant or the destruction of thousands of microscopic entities that inhabit the plant. The unique and all-inclusive nature of the Jain doctrine of who (and what) possesses a soul adds another dimension to the already restrictive imperative of *ahimsa* in Jain cuisine.

*Ahimsa* and the preservation of *jivas* are important to Jains not only because they are ethical obligations, but also because disobeying these doctrines is said to have unfortunate consequences. Destruction of a living being garners *karma*, believed by Jains to be a material substance that envelops the soul and traps it to the earthly plane.<sup>31</sup> It prevents the soul from gaining omniscience, and is thereby a primary obstacle in *moksha-marg* ideology. There are both auspicious and inauspicious effects of *karma*, all forms of bondage to the cycle of rebirth. A particularly nasty kind of *karma* is associated with violence in Jainism, so much so that the act of “injuring [is] the bondage, the delusion, the death, the hell.”<sup>32</sup> By following such intense dietary

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<sup>29</sup> Sangave, *Aspects of Jaina Religion*, 30, 33.

<sup>30</sup> In more than one Jain kitchen, I noticed that Jain women would often refer to the ants creeping along their counters as *jivas*. It seems to be a catch-all term for any kind of living thing as well as a special term reserved for insect invaders—perhaps a reminder not to crush or flush them, no matter how tempting it may be.

<sup>31</sup> Devendra Shastri, T.G. Kalghatgi, and T.S. Devodoss, *A Source-Book In Jaina Philosophy*, (Udaipur: Sri Tarak Guru Jain Granthalaya 1983) 428.

<sup>32</sup> Jacobi, *The Golden Book of Jainism*, 37.

restrictions, Jains safeguard themselves from “some sort of [cosmic] punishment”<sup>33</sup> that comes from eating restricted foods. Jain dietary laws should not be viewed as solely altruistic, but intimately linked with ideas of *karma* and consequence.

### **Forbidden Fruit (and Other Foods): The *Abhakshyas* and Dietary Restrictions**

Foods that violate Jain philosophy and are therefore prohibited by Jain scriptures are called *abhakshyas*. A standard list of 22 *abhakshyas* is used as a guideline by both *Shvetambar* and *Digambar* Jains, though this list has often changed throughout the centuries as Jain scholars debated the merits of consuming or avoiding certain foods.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, all of the women involved in this study identified a similar set of foods as *abhakshya* and forbidden by their religion. This list includes foods traditionally considered non-vegetarian in India (meat, eggs, fish, and alcohol), foods that traditional *Vaishnava* Hindus refrain from consuming (mushrooms, garlic, onion, and carrots),<sup>35</sup> as well as foods that are unique to Jain vegetarianism (snow, ice, poison, clay, seeds, eggplant, figs, pickles, potatoes, ginger, honey, butter, “empty” fruits, unknown fruits and vegetables, and spoiled foods). Consuming meat involves the slaughter of animals, an act most vigorously discouraged by Jain scripture. Some Jains also believe gathering honey harms bees and that the sticky substance traps insects and eggs that would later be killed by consumption. Underground vegetables are forbidden because their harvest necessitates the destruction of the plant as well as the microorganisms in the surrounding soil. Root vegetables are also classified as *anata-kayas*, plants that contain not just one *jiva*, but an infinite number of souls.<sup>36</sup> Eating one root vegetable would kill millions of small beings and garner a large amount of bad *karma*. Ice contains numerous microorganisms that die once consumed, as do pickles and

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<sup>33</sup> Sunayana Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 6, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> R. Williams, *Jaina Yoga*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 110.

<sup>35</sup> Selena Greising "The Art of Vaisnava Vegetarian Cooking: The Manifestation of Cultural Identity Through the Culinary Craft" (2014). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. Paper 1813.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, *Jaina Yoga*, 113.



other fermented foods. “Empty” fruits are defined as foods for which consumption would do an unnecessarily large amount of harm in return for a small amount of fulfillment, such as flowers. The *abhakshyas* illustrate the extreme lengths that Jain ideology will go to in order to proscribe *ahimsa* as a weapon against the trappings of *karma*.

Many foods are forbidden simply because they are believed to induce undesirable qualities into the body and mind, such as laziness or aggression. The Jain diet is ideally composed of *sattvic* foods, which are thought to give the consumer a pure and spiritual disposition.<sup>37</sup> *Sattvic* foods are sometimes labeled as “simple,” lacking the luxurious taste that would otherwise induce passion. Many (but not all) vegetables qualify as *sattvic* food, as do breads such as *chapatti*. A limited amount of the diet can be composed of *rajsik* foods, cuisine characterized by delicious tastes, spices, and copious amounts of *ghee* or other delectable substances. However, *rajsik* foods should be avoided in large quantities, as they are liable to cause laziness. *Tamsik* foods should be forbidden at all costs, as they cause bad thoughts and create ill health. Meat, alcohol, and eggplant are considered types of *tamsik* foods as they are thought to induce anger or lust in their consumers. The three categories of *sattvic*, *rajsik*, and *tamsik*<sup>38</sup> play a large role in discerning what is accepted and what is *abhakshya*.

In addition to avoiding certain foods, the ideal Jain diet is also comprised of a number of practices that further restrict the devotee’s eating habits. Since ancient times, Jain ideology encouraged its followers to only drink boiled or strained water. Theoretically, cleansing the water of *jiva* prevented the accumulation of bad *karma* through ridding the liquid of sentient beings. While boiling water to destroy the *jiva* is obviously an act of violence, some Jains rationalize this act by conceding that killing these few beings is permitted as it ensures they will

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<sup>37</sup> Shugan Jain, conversation with K.C. McConnell, October 10, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> These categories were originally borrowed by Jains from Hindu philosophy.

not reproduce and create even more microorganisms that would later die through water consumption. Before the widespread use of water filtration systems in the home, Jains would also strain water through a cloth to rid it of *jiva*. In all of the Jain homes visited in this study, straining cloths were still tied around kitchen faucets, despite the presence of modern-day filtration devices. The practice of *ratri-bhojana bandh*, the avoidance of eating food after sunset, is another important dietary practice that has been extolled by Jain philosophers for centuries.<sup>39</sup> Many Jains believe that tiny microorganisms and insects are more prone to enter food after nightfall, the darkness rendering them indistinguishable to the human eye. Accidentally consuming these beings violates the principle of *ahimsa* and accumulates bad *karma*.

During Jain religious observances such as *Paryushan*, *Ashtami*, and *Chaturdashi*, the observance of these dietary restrictions are intensified and new restrictions are also introduced to invoke a heightened sense of religiosity.<sup>40</sup> Jains will sometimes forgo the consumption of green vegetables on holidays and festivals because they may contain small insects or other tiny *jivas*. None of the women interviewed were willing to uphold this practice throughout the year, though some mentioned that Jain ascetics may forgo green vegetables altogether.

Whilst the texts of Jainism espouse a number of dietary restrictions, it is important to remember that the written word does not always translate to the lived experience. One cannot assume that a Jain follows all (or any) of the previously described restrictions. Significance is instead found in how Jains convey the value of their diet through their mundane lives. The present study is not concerned with whether or not Jain women are “authentically” following their religion’s ideal diet, but rather how these restrictions serve as sites of identification and control.

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<sup>39</sup> Williams, *Jaina Yoga*, 107.

<sup>40</sup> Shakuntala Jain, conversation with K.C. McConnell, November 3, 2014.

## *Entering her Kitchen: Jain Women and their Cooking*

### **Discovering the Lives of Jain Women**

The demographics of the female Jain community in India are essential to the context of this study.<sup>41</sup> Jain Indian women have an immensely high literacy rate of 90.6%. They are the most literate female religious community in India, and the beneficiaries of an ample amount of education. Despite this, Jain women also have the lowest work participation rate at 9.2%. Jain wives are more likely to be found doing domestic work within the home rather than maintaining a paying job, making the question of Jain women's relations to their families' meals all the more important. Most important for this study is the obvious control that Indian Jain women are seen to possess over the home in the absence of outside work, and the likelihood that they have also received an education that allows them to read their religious texts.

### **Methodology and Theory**

The ethnographic data for this research was obtained through interviewing fifteen self-identified Jain laywomen residing in Jaipur, Rajasthan. Because this study took place in a single location, these findings are particular to conceptions of identity held by Jains residing in Jaipur, and may not accurately reflect the experiences of Jain women residing in other parts of India or in diaspora communities. As Jaipur is one of India's metropolitan hubs of Jainism, these results are important in detailing one of the major communities of this religion. Nine of the women interviewed identified as *Digambar* Jains, four of the women identified as *Shvetambar* Jains, and two of the women stated that they had ties to both traditions. This research did not find any major differences between the diets held by women of differing sects. These women ranged in age from their early 20's to their early 60's, with the majority of the interviewees reporting their age as closer to the higher end of the spectrum. Most of these women were married and had

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<sup>41</sup> Jain, *Jains in India and Abroad*, 79, 67, 78.

children. Notably, the majority of these women were also employed, especially if they had no children or if their children were married and living in different houses. These women were self-selected through the help of the staff of the Jain Vidya Sansthan, a Jain education and temple complex. These women were selected with the criteria that they were able to communicate and understand a basic level of English. The interview was comprised of 30 questions concerning Jain diet, Jain religion, and family life. Most women responded to the questions orally, while a few felt more comfortable writing their answers in English. Additionally, I cooked alongside these women in the kitchen, making note of both recipes and culinary practices.

This study draws on an array of interdisciplinary theories. It is inspired by burgeoning research on the semiotics and anthropology of food, especially as it relates to religion. Such studies describe how sizzling pots of *sabzhi* or the scent of fresh-baked *chapatti* tantalize more than just our taste buds, but also stimulate us to form ourselves in relation to the cuisine and its underlying significance. Notions of performance as a method of reiterating identity also largely influenced this study. The present research draws on these ideas of gender and performance and also reexamines them in light of their interaction with food production as well as how they manifest in the South Asian context. It also investigates feminist theories of the female body as a site of control and empowerment within Jain ideology and its impact on the lived experiences of Jain women. Finally, it examines ideas of performing “modernity,” and what these performances indicate about the definition and importance of the “modern.” These theories are critically examined in light of the author’s own observations on the meaning of food as it is perceived by the participating Jain women of this study.

## Performing Piety through Food

Contrary to some Western post-Enlightenment thoughts on spirituality, the nature of religion is not always that of a private act. In the South Asian context, religion is performed constantly and expressively. From spirituality-specific greetings and phrases to auto rickshaw dashboards decorated with deities or images of the *Kaaba*, faith is a visible act in India. These actions can be defined as performances because they are done publically, with the knowledge that there is an audience who can scrutinize these behaviors. They are also conducted in a manner that affirms an already adopted identity, such as “Hindu” or “Muslim.” Finally, they are acts that are said to have “made or did something rather than describing something else,”<sup>42</sup> in this case making religious divisions and identity real through actions.

Jain cooking is a religious performance in the same vein as the aforementioned displays. For the Jain women of this study, preparing food and adhering to Jain dietary restrictions is not just a mundane act, but also a way of signifying religion and reaffirming religious identity to their family and community members. It marks them as pious, and rewards them with both cosmological and social significance. Certain foods are considered more sacrilegious than others, with the consumption of meat being amongst the most religiously offensive acts. As one Jain woman stated, “Jains who follow the Jain rules will never eat meat...I think that [a Jain who eats meat] is not Jain, he is only by birth Jain. But he does not have the knowledge of Jain religion.”<sup>43</sup> Another Jain woman described her parents as “sincerely religious” because they faithfully followed Jain dietary restrictions.<sup>44</sup> Such statements illustrate how cooking and food consumption are essential performances of piety for Jain women. A woman who cooks or eats the wrong kinds of foods displays disregard for the Jain creed. A woman who follows the Jain

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<sup>42</sup> Louisa Schein, “Performing Modernity,” in *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no. 3 (1999), 368.

<sup>43</sup> Manju Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 7, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Shakuntala Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 4, 2014.

diet can be regarded as a paragon of religiosity by her family. In the South Asian context, the performance of piety as a marker of wifedom is especially important for Jain women, as “a virtuous wife is an asset to Jain communities”<sup>45</sup> and gains special recognition amongst her fellow Jains, her husband, and her in-laws.

The connection between food and faith may be so vital to the religiosity of Jain women because of food’s “powerful means of creating alternative visions of life and death,”<sup>46</sup> a duality that’s uncertainty is at the heart of many traditions. One Jain woman connected the consequences of one’s present diet to the afterlife, remarking how “the food which doesn’t help in this birth...how can it help in rebirth?...So firstly, [Jain diet is] helpful in this life, and secondly [its helpful] in next life also.”<sup>47</sup> By taking control of life and death through maintaining a minimally destructive diet, Jains imbue the act of eating with cosmological significance. Eating becomes a holy act, and the ritual performance of cooking and consuming by Jain women becomes one of the most powerful tools of recognizing and expressing religiosity.

Again, this is not to say that every Jain woman follows a strict Jain diet. One woman interviewed in this study admitted to eating onions and garlic, reminiscing how growing up in Mumbai influenced her and her friends to try new foods that their parents had not consumed.<sup>48</sup> Many other women involved in this study also commented on how they would occasionally eat vegetarian foods traditionally prohibited by Jain philosophy, such as potatoes and carrots. The few Jain women who stated that they occasionally ate outside their home commented that they would consume vegetables at restaurants that they would not usually consume at their own dining tables, such as onions or garlic. However, many of these women included the prohibition

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<sup>45</sup> Kelting, *Heroic Wives*, 74.

<sup>46</sup> Gillian Feeley-Harnik, “Religion and Food: An Anthropological Perspective,” in *Journal of The American Academy Of Religion* LXIII (1995), 579.

<sup>47</sup> Premlata Bothra, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 18, 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Saroj Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 5, 2014.

of root vegetables in Jainism as a defining factor of their religion's practices. Even when these acts of dietary asceticism are not performed, they still hold a large sway in influencing these women's perceptions of religiosity.

It is also important to note that the celebration of religious festivals in the Jain community is often marked with a heightened sense of dietary restriction, such as forgoing green vegetables during *Paryushana*. It is evident that Jain worshippers feel more obligated to follow Jain dietary laws during religious festivals because the act of eating is considered a performance of religiosity. It becomes a question of *when and where* these acts of religious eating are performed that increase their significance as indicators of piety among Jain women.

Because cooking and eating is fraught with so many religious implications in Jainism, the Jain kitchen can be described as a holy space—the perfect backdrop for this performance of religiosity. Shoes are removed, and those who wander aimlessly into the kitchen without first removing their sandals are vigorously shooed away.<sup>49</sup> In every Jain kitchen I entered, the faucets were clothed in straining cloth, a ceremonial dress that ensures that no microorganisms can infiltrate the water. Preparing the food is conducted in such a ritualistic manner that it is obvious that these women have put on this show many times before. Bowls of rice and flour are sifted and searched for any sign of insects. Every ladyfinger is delicately sliced and examined for stray bugs that may be hiding amongst the seeds. If an insect invader is found, they are gently blown out of the kitchen space with a few short breaths. They are never smashed, drowned, or destroyed. The ingredients are measured instinctively but accurately. Keeping in line with the tenets of asceticism and simple living, nothing can be overused or wasted. If the wrong kind of flour is used in preparing the *chapatti*, the Jain cook sweeps it back into its correct container with

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<sup>49</sup> Observation by K.C. McConnell, November 4, 2014.

a chuckle, even if oil or other seasoning has already been added into the mix.<sup>50</sup> The Jain principle of *ahimsa* is present within the kitchen even before it reaches the dining table, the performance of cooking carrying as much weight as the final product.

The prevalence of diet as a marker of religiosity among Jains may stem from the religion's ancient espousal of vegetarianism and its history with "the battle of the Vedic sacrifice."<sup>51</sup> Once used as an important point of difference between their religion and Vedic practices, Jains today continue to utilize food and dietary practices as a method of differentiations from Hindus and other religions. The physical act of consumption is a religious performance of *ahimsa* and Jain religion. When asked how they signify their religion in public, the majority of the participants in this study cited the filtration of water or the avoidance of eating at night as markers of Jainism. These practices are social cues to outsiders that the performer is a Jain, as well as signs to both the Jain and non-Jain communities that the performer is attempting to keep Jain practices alive and visible in the public sphere. As one interviewee described, "it is our diet and our lifestyle that basically shows that we are Jain."<sup>52</sup> The dining table becomes the space in which Jains can most actively and fervently express their religiosity and display the vitality of their minority community to others.

It is notable that most of the interviewees remarked that Jain women are more likely to follow a stricter Jain diet than Jain men, as Jain men often cannot juggle the restrictions of the religious diet with their occupational lives. Jain women are the most frequent performers of religion through dietary restriction, if only among the laity. The implications and importance of this gender divide reflect the role of Jain women's performed preservation of piety amongst their families and communities.

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<sup>50</sup> Observation by K.C. McConnell, November 9, 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Achaya, *Indian Food: A Historical Companion*, 55.

<sup>52</sup> Jeevanshu Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 10, 2014.



### **Ruling with an Iron *Chammach*: Autonomy and Control**

While both genders engage in the performance of diet as an act of piety, it becomes an especially charged action when undertaken by Jain laywomen. The low work participation rate of Jain women demonstrates their importance within the domestic and familial realms, while men are often designated as the “breadwinners.” Thus, an assumption is made that “Jain women spend their time either performing religious activities or doing household chores,”<sup>53</sup> many of which revolve around feeding the family. Jain women play an important role in maintaining the household and its religious traditions—and in Jainism, diet falls into both of these spheres of activity. As one interviewee explained, “a good Jain wife makes herself good, makes her husband good, makes her child[ren] good, and makes the family good.”<sup>54</sup> She unites the religious and the mundane and passes on the traditions to her family, oftentimes through food.

The responsibility of preserving Jain culture through food is linked to the historical relationship women have had with feeding their families. Cooking and food preparation are often considered “woman’s work.” Most of the women interviewed also identified themselves as responsible for food preparation in their families, and all of the women interviewed remarked that they had learned their culinary skills from their mothers or other female relatives. Husbands were sometimes observed aiding their wives in cooking, but only with minute tasks such as chopping vegetables, and their work was accomplished in spaces outside of the kitchen.<sup>55</sup> Western writings on women and food have extensively detailed “how feeding the family becomes a means not just of constructing family, but also of constructing oneself as a woman and mother,” and how women are subsequently more likely to have their feminine identities

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<sup>53</sup> Jain, *Jains in India and Abroad*, 67.

<sup>54</sup> Snehlata Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 8, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Observations by K.C. McConnell, November 7, 2014 and November 9, 2014.

evaluated based on their ability to feed their families.<sup>56</sup> South Asian notions of virtuous wifedom put extra stress on Jain women as their duties include feeding the family in a way that improves and maintains *everybody's* religiosity. She is charged with upholding the morality of the family, as “if a woman in the family acts immorally, then the morality of the whole family is called into question.”<sup>57</sup> She is not only what she eats, but also what her family eats.

However, the pressure put on Jain wives and mothers by the community does not only serve as a stressor for these women. Recent literature concerning gender and food has focused on how “feeding others is a major component of female identity, and it is here that women can have influence over others.”<sup>58</sup> The kitchen becomes the woman’s kingdom, the place where she exercises more control over her surroundings than anywhere else. The Jain woman simultaneously feels the burden and the joy that comes with feeding her family, especially when conceptions of correct and incorrect diet hold such weight in her religion. Some of the interviewees expressed that they cook not just because it was expected of them, but also because they “love to prepare [food]”<sup>59</sup> or “love] to cook and serve the family.”<sup>60</sup> Maintaining a Jain diet becomes a site of pleasure for these women, and a role that they take on with pride.

Many of the Jain women interviewed expressed that they felt a sense of control over the family’s diet. The kitchen becomes a space where they maintain a large sense of authority, issuing commands to their husbands about what can and cannot enter their domain.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, Jain women also maintain control over the family’s diet itself and are adamant about upholding the religious standards of the family’s meals. Many women reported that they would be

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<sup>56</sup> B. Beagan, G. E. Chapman, A. D’Sylva, and B. R. Bassett. 2008. “It’s Just Easier For Me To Do It’: Rationalizing The Family Division Of Foodwork,” in *Sociology* 42, no 4 (2008), 656, 663.

<sup>57</sup> Kelting, *Heroic Wives*, 75.

<sup>58</sup> Psyche Williams-Forsen, “Other Women Cooked For My Husband: Negotiating Gender, Food, and Identities in an African American/ Ghanaian Household” in *Feminist Studies* 36 no. 2 (2010), 449.

<sup>59</sup> Shakuntala Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 4, 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Sunayana Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 6, 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Observation by K.C. McConnell, November 3, 2014.

extremely unhappy if a family member started forgoing Jain food restrictions, especially as they pertain to animal products. One woman went so far as to say that her “heart [would be] hurting” if her children decided to eat meat.<sup>62</sup> Some of the women interviewed suggested that if their family members began to consume non-vegetarian food, they would actively try to change their dietary habits by “force[ing] them not to eat and [to] quit eating it”<sup>63</sup> by explaining the benefits of vegetarianism. Another woman remembered how she was able to change her husband’s eating habits to abandoning onion and garlic in the earlier years of her marriage because she controlled the kitchen and would not cook such foods for him, so “how could [he] eat?”<sup>64</sup> Thus, Jain women are shown to exercise a large amount of power and autonomy through their culinary duties. The restrictive Jain diet is handed down through the generations in the pots and pans of Jain women who make sure that the worst *abhakshyas* never make their way inside the kitchen or inside their families.

The vested interest in maintaining the restricted diet among Jain women may not only derive from their perceived role as the religious vanguards, but from a desire to preserve their power in the family by controlling the family’s emotions. As previously discussed, Jain ideas about food borrow heavily from conceptions of *sattvic*, *rajsik*, and *tamsik* cuisine. Consuming *tamsik* food is believed to influence a person’s thoughts to become more violent and impure. Interestingly, two of the women interviewed linked the consumption of some *abhakshya* foods—such as meat or alcohol—to familial violence or beatings. Perhaps Jain women subversively exercise control over their husband’s moods and behavior through their belief in the power of *sattvic* cuisine.

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<sup>62</sup> Saroj Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 5, 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Jeevanshu Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 10, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Snehlata Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 8, 2014.

Along with such discussions of the woman's power in her position as the family's cook, it is important to note that the relegation of the woman's duties to the domestic realm may not exist in every Jain family. Indeed, many women commented on how changing ideas about "women's work" in India allow many younger Jain women to hold a job alongside their husbands. Additionally, two women also indicated that domestic help often assist in cooking family meals. Nevertheless, the present experience of the majority of Jain women seems to be that of the homemaker, as indicated by their low participation rate in the 2001 census. The Jain women interviewed also indicated that their memories of cooking were largely based around the women in their families, and that such connections between femininity and food continue to coexist along with an increase of women in the workplace. One woman reminisced about the special role her own mother had in shaping the entire experience of Jain family and domesticity, remarking how:

"woman is the center of the family...the attachment we have for our mother is missing in the younger children for their parents because...[the parents] have not given that care to their children...but for us our parents are so important because they gave us so much care...it makes all the difference, the kind of mother or wife you have in the family, [it] will determine the whole character of the family."<sup>65</sup>

When examining the role that food has in the Jain woman's life, it is important to remember the kitchen can be considered both a site of domestic subjugation and empowerment. It is certainly no easy task to uphold the high standards of Jain diet, especially when one must also juggle other domestic or occupational responsibilities. But taking on the role of the family's religious and culinary supervisor can fill the Jain woman with a large amount of pride and importance. The relationship between family meals and Jain women is "laden with

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<sup>65</sup> Kusum Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 12, 2014

contradictions entailed in woman's valorization through activities that simultaneously index their subordination"<sup>66</sup>—food is both a site of autonomy and of regulation to a gender-specific role.

### **The Jain Female Body and Notions of Purity**

Much of Jain food is cooked to conform to ideas of both *ahimsa* and maintaining purity. Ingestion of microorganisms is considered not only harmful towards small *jivas*, but also repulsive and damaging to one's cleanliness. Jain *sutras* reference the religion's penchant for purity when detailing the origins of various animals, including "parasites...vermin generated in filthy substances and in the skin of living animals," mentioning how the knowledge of the existence of these vermin "will [make you] careful and circumspect with regard to your food."<sup>67</sup> Talking with Jains about their feelings towards animals made it clear that they often had no love for such vermin, as they expressed a desire to keep any dirty creatures as far away from the house as possible.<sup>68</sup> It can be inferred that this desire is a manifestation of the Jain obsession with purity rather than with *ahimsa*. This emphasis on bodily purity is fraught with seemingly contradictory notions that affect Jain women's identities in ways both positive and negative.

As the domestic caretakers, Jain women are tasked with maintaining the high standards of Jain purity for the entire family through meals. In Jainism, "the purity of food depends most of all on that of the person who cooks it."<sup>69</sup> The women interviewed seemed to recognize this role as one of incredible importance.<sup>70</sup> They saw maintaining a Jain diet as acting in their family's best interests, emphasizing how Jain food "is made with pure, homemade, and hygienic

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<sup>66</sup> Jon D. Holtzman, "Food and Memory" in *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* 35, no.1 (2006), 370.

<sup>67</sup> Jacobi, *The Golden Book of Jainism*, 162, 164.

<sup>68</sup> Observations by K.C. McConnell, November 4, 2014, November 5, 2014, and November 9, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation*, 304.

<sup>70</sup> One of the women interviewed was so meticulous about ensuring the meal's purity that she refused to let anyone with nail polish touch the *chapatti* dough, as she considered it to be possibly contaminated by animal products and germs.

ingredients, so it is good for health.”<sup>71</sup> Some of the women also noted Jainism’s focus on the wholesomeness of the body as a precursor to removing impurity from the soul. Jain food is seen as “*sattvic*...[and] the quality of *sattvic* things are that they are light, they take [the soul] upwards, they are eliminating. These are the things that help you grow closer to your consciousness.”<sup>72</sup> The mind-body connection is essential to Jains, and Jain women are tasked with making sure their entire family remains unpolluted through following the religion’s dietary restrictions in their cooking.

The confluence of bodily and spiritual purity is a manifestation of the amelioration of the tension of practicing *moksha-marg* as a layperson. Following a Jain diet helps the consumer to realize the lofty goal of liberation, while also allowing them a means of wellbeing in the physical world. The purity of the Jain diet and the benefits that it bestows affirms that it is “the possibility of striving for liberation that also provides the possibility of wellbeing within the world.”<sup>73</sup> By extension, the value of this link between physical and spiritual purity is that it provides justification for Jains to seek happiness in the material world alongside seeking entry into the transcendent world, as the two goals are made to intersect. Without this justification, the welfare of Jain culture and lifestyle would be at a philosophical risk. Women, as espousers of and creators of the purity of Jain cuisine, thus play a vital role in ensuring that the balance between *moksha-marg* and worldly wellbeing is maintained at the gustatory level.

While the emphasis on bodily purity in Jain diet can be seen as a site for women’s importance and control, it is also a site in which women are controlled. It is a philosophy that designates the female body as essentially impure. Traditionally, Jain women are unable to enter the kitchen while they are menstruating, displacing them from the site that they would otherwise

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<sup>71</sup> Sunayana Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 6, 2014.

<sup>72</sup> Kusum Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 12, 2014.

<sup>73</sup> Cort, *Jains in the World*, 202.

regulate. The emphasis on eating purely *sattvic* food also implies that the human body is something to be improved upon, a weak vessel that must be made holy, lest it fall into sin. The limitations of the *sattvic* diet are especially palpable for women, as they “are referred to in scientific literature as ‘nutritionally vulnerable,’”<sup>74</sup> possessing bodies that must undergo additional strain in order to maintain the high standards of the Jain diet. This is especially true for pregnant and lactating women. The bodies of women – bodies which have substantially different nutritional needs than men – are therefore both morally and physical culpable when they cannot faithfully follow the Jain diet without additional non-*sattvic* nutritional sources.

While this view was not openly expressed by any of the women interviewed, some Jain women hinted at the potentially harmful imperative of following the Jain diet at all costs. One woman commented that in her opinion, “restricted [food] is never acceptable, but in cases of some serious diseases and strict medication they can be allowed. But we have to accept some sort of [cosmic] punishment against it.”<sup>75</sup> Other women expressed similar views, sometimes stating that there were health-related exceptions for consuming plant-based *abhakshyas*, but never any exceptions for meat or egg products. One of the Jain women encountered during the course of this research was undergoing a serious illness, and was said to have never made any dietary exceptions to her strict Jainism in spite of her condition.<sup>76</sup> It seems that many of the Jain women involved in this study placed a high value on the purity of their bodies, even if the necessary diet incurred potentially detrimental effects on their health. They are held responsible for the ability of their bodies to conform to Jain purity norms.

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<sup>74</sup> Kathryn Paxton George, “A Paradox of Ethical Vegetarianism: Unfairness To Women And Children” in *Food For Thought: The Debate Over Eating Meat*, 1st ed., (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2004), 263.

<sup>75</sup> Sunayana Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 6, 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Observation by K.C. McConnell, November 12, 2014.

The issue of purity in Jain diet is yet another potent and polarizing force in shaping the identity of Jain women. While it allows Jain women a certain sense of control over their family and their culture, it also posits their bodies as impure and in need of correction. The Jain women involved in this study expressed this dichotomy through their insistence of the spiritually beneficial qualities of the Jain diet marred with the underlying anxiety about making sure that the body is kept pure at all costs. The insistence of these women on aligning issues of wellbeing—spiritual or otherwise—with their diets was a pervasive theme throughout the interviews.

### **Science and Reaffirming Identity through Modernity**

A final theme that was consistently expressed during the interviews with Jain women was the performance of and conforming to modernity through diet. Modernity is a term rife with controversy within academic discourse, as many scholars continue to argue about what exactly constitutes “the modern.” In this study, modernity is defined as the widespread adoption of Western philosophies that emerged out of the Enlightenment-era (1688-1789) and into the public realm. These philosophies include an overall rejection of divinely ordained authority and an emphasis on science as being a paramount mode of empirically and rationally examining the world; in the Western world, “science has been inextricably connected to modernity, secularism, and the state.”<sup>77</sup> The women involved in this study seemed to be “hyperaware of the West as somehow emblematic of the modern”<sup>78</sup> in that they used diet to align their religious identity with this valorization of science.

Jain women who were younger than 35 or who were involved in scholarly professions seemed particularly keen to extol the scientific and nutritional nature of Jain cooking. They often expressed a belief that “Jainism religion is totally based on scientific [thought]...if you compare

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<sup>77</sup> B. Subramaniam, “Archaic Modernities: Science, Secularism, and Religion in Modern India,” in *Social Text* 18 no. 3 (2000), 71.

<sup>78</sup> Schein, “Performing Modernity,” 363.



the science and Jainism, they are both going for the similar path.”<sup>79</sup> At least one Jain woman linked her dietary restrictions to scientific research on the body, remarking that the *abhakshyas* are forbidden because they are difficult to digest and cause the body to become lethargic.<sup>80</sup> She also maintained that Jains refuse to eat after sundown not only because of religious reasons, but also because scientific research shows that eating before bedtime weakens the body’s ability to rest. Another Jain woman pointed to research that detailed the benefits of vegetarianism over a more carnivorous diet, stating that the proteins in legumes “are more readily absorbed by our body[than meat]. Non-vegetarian food escalates or maybe increases the risk of getting cancer—it’s a proven fact.”<sup>81</sup> A similar statement was reiterated by yet another Jain woman who stated that “Jain diet does not include non-vegetarian [food], so it is less fattening.”<sup>82</sup> Linking Jain dietary practices to health and science was clearly a recurring subject throughout these interviews.

It is not the purpose of this paper to evaluate whether or not these scientific claims are valid. Rather, this research demonstrates the importance of these statements as points of religious identity construction and reaffirmation by these Jain women. As India shifts from a developing power to one of the world’s most quickly expanding economies, notions of modernity and alignment with “the modern” become more important. Yet a recent rise in religious nationalism within India has sought to incorporate modern science into India’s ancient history, framing “the modernist project of science as really nothing but an Indian science, anticipated in the ancient science and technological history of India.”<sup>83</sup> Science is co-opted as a tool for demonstrating religious pride and affirming the religion’s rich, rational heritage. The Indian is able to perform

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<sup>79</sup> Apurva Mehta, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 18, 2014

<sup>80</sup> Sushma Singhvi, conversation with K.C. McConnell, November 11, 2014.

<sup>81</sup> Jeevanshu Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 10, 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Sunayana Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 6, 2014.

<sup>83</sup> Subramaniam, “Archaic Modernities,” 81.

modernity through espousing scientific principles while also reaffirming his or her religion's superiority by intertwining it with modernity.

Though often witnessed through the promotion of the Vedic sciences by Hindu nationalists, Jains have sought to make modernity a vehicle for the espousal of their own religion. As an upper-middle class, educated community that thrives in the realms of business and academia, Jains have been especially exposed to valorizations of science and rationalism. A minority group that has had their identity consistently compromised, many Jains are also invested in revitalizing their religion through these co-opted performances of modernity. Flipping through the pages of the numerous works on Jainism written by Jain scholars, it is not hard to find arguments for the preemptive alignment of ancient Jain texts with modern ideas of science, such as biological taxonomy or the benefits of avoiding ingesting microorganisms. As one Jain woman remarked, some Jains believe that Jainism can become more popularly known "if the tenets of Jainism are explained in a logical manner and are [made] useful to you. And if they are not contradictory to any worldly life."<sup>84</sup> Explaining Jain dietary principles in a logical manner becomes a way for Jains to reaffirm the religion's place in the modern world by performing diet as a simultaneously religious and scientific practice.

Within this confluence of science and religion, Jain women again play a special role in regards to their relationship with food. While some may believe that "neither science nor religion...has much of a place to offer women,"<sup>85</sup> Jain women seem to immerse themselves in this convergence of both. Because they are the people in the community most intimately connected with cooking and following a strict Jain diet, they frequently perform modernity through espousing a Jain diet. Throughout the interviews, Jain women seemed to use the rhetoric

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<sup>84</sup> Sushma Singhvi, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 13, 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Subramaniam, "Archaic Modernities" 82.

of “*sattvic* food, scientific food, healthy food” in order to convince other members of their family or even non-Jains to maintain a Jain diet—or at the very least, remain strictly vegetarian. One Jain woman emphasized the fact that it is the Jain diet’s “healthy and nutritious” quality that makes it to the ideal diet for *all* people in the world: young, old, Indian or non-Indian.<sup>86</sup> While many Jain women are now starting to embrace other performances of modernity (such as working outside the home and hiring servants to do housework), most of the Jain women involved in this study sought to situate their identity through their connection to food and advocate the scientific and healthful qualities of this food as a source of pride for their religion. By reiterating these performances of modernity, Jain women attempt to revitalize their identities to fit a growing and changing India, and continue to position themselves as the maintainers of this ancient yet seemingly scientific practice.

### ***Conclusion***

For Jain women, diet is not just a matter of taste. It is a matter of identity. Whether they are justifying their religious practices through modernity, monitoring the family’s purity, conforming to ideal notions of South Asian wifhood, or publically proclaiming their religiosity, food is a preferred mode of identity expression among these women. As religious devotees, food provides an avenue for Jain women to unite the sacred with the mundane and align their worldly bodies with the transcendental ideals of their religion. As wives and women, the Jains in this study were seen to have conformed to South Asian gender roles through food and to have used food as a means for gaining control over the other members of their family. Food allows Jain women to continue the traditions of their ancestors as well as make innovations to old customs. It allows them to reclaim and reshape Jain identity to fit changing ideals of gender equality, family, and religious expression.

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<sup>86</sup> Anjna Jain, interview by K.C. McConnell, November 14, 2014.

Identity construction among Jain women is made all the more important given the religion's history and minority status. After facing decades of decline, Jain religion is beginning to make a comeback by revitalizing the religiosity of its adherents. As the 2001 census demonstrates, more and more Jains are beginning to embrace their religion as a marker of identity that differentiates them from other religious communities in South Asia. Reestablishing this tradition takes a renewed effort by the entire community. Through this ethnographic study, Jain women are seen to be essential to this cause. They are the gatekeepers and maintainers of Jain tradition among the laity, the translators of the tenets of its texts into lived reality. Jain culture is preserved within their cuisine and kitchen as they continue to imbue their family members with the ideals of Jain living.

The continued longevity of this religion depends on the women who support it through their *masalas* and other meals. The women of this study exemplify the relevance of both food and females in sustaining a minority tradition. As the politics of defining religious identity continue to play out in the public, male-dominated sphere, we cannot forget the contributions of the women negotiating these identities within the kitchen. Because food is such a vital manifestation of religion, so important are the hands that roll the *chapatti*, that sift through the rice, that slice and dice the vegetables. Identity once nearly disintegrated is reshaped and reevaluated by these women, a process not unlike that of cooking itself. Every new reiteration is altered with just a pinch more of salt or spices. The final product both affects and is affected by the prowess of the chef, the woman who creates much more than just another family meal.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The subject of Jain food certainly deserves more examination than can be allotted within one paper. One might be interested in investigating conceptions of Jain cuisine as they change between generations, comparing contemporary recipes with those from decades or centuries ago. In doing this, I could track how Jain culture evolves to suit temporal situations. One could also examine the differences and similarities between regional Jain cuisines. Gujarati Jain food will vary from Rajasthani food, as will Maharashtrian or Southern Indian Jain cuisine. The different cuisines could then be contextualized within the specificities of Jain history and culture as they manifest in each region of India. Alternatively, Jain diaspora cuisine is also worthy of investigation. There is a plethora of scholarship surrounding culinary identity as it relates to diaspora communities, and a study of emigrant Jain groups would certainly contribute to this field.

The scholar interested in investigating the gendered roles and expectations within Jainism also has a wide array of possible topics to further explore. As more Jain women enter the workplace, their identity as homemakers becomes complicated with their other responsibilities. A scholar may be interested in examining how Jains view the changing roles of women from the vantage point of wives, husbands, daughters, sons, and ascetics. Additionally, the scope of this study was not able to encompass the relationship that Jain ascetic women have with food and maintaining the community's religious identity. A study of the eating habits of Jain nuns could be compared and contrasted with the role food plays in the lives of Jain laywomen. The scholar interested in Jainism has a bevy of intriguing research topics to choose from, including those inspired by and derived from this investigation of Jain women and food.

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## **Glossary**

*abhakshyas*: in Jainism, foods that are forbidden for consumption within Jain textual commentaries; a standard list of 22 is common amongst Jains.

*agmas*: Jain texts based on Mahavira's teachings.

*ahimsa*: often defined as nonviolence; includes the elimination of suffering or pain caused to animals, plants, and elemental microorganisms.

*ajiva*: matter which does not possess a soul.

*anata-kayas*: plants that contain an infinite number of souls within them; examples are potatoes and other root vegetables.

*Ashtami*: the eighth and twenty-third days of the month in the Jain calendar; Jains sometimes forgo eating green vegetables on these days.

*Baniya*: a Rajasthani term for the merchant castes which is sometimes used to refer to Jains; now considered a pejorative.

*chammach*: spoon

*chapatti*: a popular kind of Indian flatbread that often accompanies meals.

*Chaturdashi*: the fourteenth and twenty-ninth days of the month in the Jain calendar; Jains sometimes forgo eating green vegetables on these days.

*dharm*: in Jainism, refers to the virtues extolled by the *tirthankars*.

*Digambar*: one of two main sects of Jainism; differ from *Shvetambaras* in that their monks reject clothing, they dispute the potential for women to reach enlightenment, and they believe that omniscient (enlightened) saints no longer need to eat to stay alive.

*ghee*: clarified cow butter often used in Indian cooking.

*guru*: a teacher or master who dispenses wisdom to students, oftentimes in a South Asian religious context.

Jain Vidya Sansthan: an institution in Jaipur dedicated to the study of Jainism's past and present.

*jina*: conqueror, a person who has conquered the material world and the temptations of the senses.

*jiva*: a soul, or that matter which possesses a soul.

*karma*: defined in Jainism as a material entity that sticks to souls that display strong emotions or perform certain actions; the removal of this substance is the goal of several Jain philosophies.

*kevala-jnana*: enlightenment or omniscience.

*Kshatriya*: a warrior/kingly caste in Indian society.

*masala*: spice or spice mix often used in Indian cooking.

*moksha*: in Jainism, synonymous with *kevala-jnana*; a state of tranquility outside the cycle of rebirth.

*moksha-marg*: an ideal Jain lifestyle that ultimately aims to transcend the world and obtain liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

*Paryushana*: an eight-to-ten day Jain festival that occurs during the monsoon season; Jains often fast or avoid eating green vegetables during this time.

*rajsik*: a descriptor used for foods believed to induce laziness in their consumers.

*ratri-bhojana bandh*: the avoidance of eating after nightfall in Jainism.

*sabzhi*: Indian cooked vegetable dishes.

*sattvic*: a descriptor used for foods believed to induce purity and calmness in their consumers.

*Shvetambar*: one of two main sects of Jainism; differ from *Digambars* in that their monks wear white robes, they believe that female ascetics can gain enlightenment, and they ascertain that enlightened saints must still consume food in order to live.

*tamsik*: a descriptor used for foods believed to induce impure or violent thoughts in their consumers.

*tattvas*: the essential truths of reality in Jain philosophy.

*tirthankar*: “ford-maker;” a person who has freed him or herself from the cycle of rebirth and can help other Jains do the same; there have been 24 recognized *tirthankars* throughout Jain history.

*Upanishads*: Indian philosophical texts believed to be composed from 800-400 BCE; often considered a part of the Hindu canon.

### **Appendix: A List of Foods Prepared by Jain Women**

The following is a list of meals prepared by Jain women that I encountered during her fieldwork. A brief description of each food is provided. Foods marked as “*Paryushana*-friendly” lack green vegetables and therefore can be eaten by Jains during *Paryushana*.

**Daal:** a staple of Jain cuisine; boiled lentils mixed with spices; often used for dipping;  
*Paryushana*-friendly.

**Chapatti:** an Indian flatbread that popularly accompanies home-cooked meals; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Paratha with Ridge Gourd Stuffing:** a pancake made of wheat flour and stuffed with ridge gourd mixed with gram flour.

**Mehti Paratha:** a pancake made from gram flour mixed with *mehti* leaf and seasoned with red chili powder, green chili, and black pepper.

**Laccha Paratha:** a pancake made of wheat flour; the dough is folded so as to create layers within the pancake; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Cheela (Sweet Pancake):** a pancake made of wheat flour and sweetened with sugar;  
*Paryushana*-friendly.

**Samosa:** a fried shell of wheat flour stuffed with raw banana and spiced with green chilies.

**Simple Rice:** rice boiled with salt and *ghee*; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Sweet Rice:** rice colored with turmeric powder and flavored with sugar, clove, lychee powder, and dried fruits; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Savory Rice:** rice colored with turmeric powder and flavored with red chili powder, peas, aniseed, and dried fruits.

**Curry:** boiled gram flour mixed with spices to create a stew; often used for dipping;

*Paryushana*-friendly.

**Lapata (Sweet Curry):** boiled wheat flour mixed with cardamom, ginger powder, sugar, and black pepper; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Ridge Gourd Masala:** chopped ridge gourd seasoned with red chili powder.

**Okra Masala:** sliced and chopped okra mixed seasoned with turmeric and red chili powder.

**Cucumber Sabzhi:** sliced cucumber seasoned with red chili powder and ginger.

**Tomato Sabzhi:** sliced and boiled tomato mixed with mango powder and raisins; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Bread Pakora:** bread fried in gram flour and seasoned with red chili; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Plain Baati:** a Rajasthani dish; a hard, round ball of bread made from wheat flour; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Stuffed Baati:** a Rajasthani dish; a hard, round ball of bread made from wheat flour and stuffed with peas, dried fruits, and spices.

**Churma:** a Rajasthani dish; a sweet dish of crumbled bread made from wheat flour and flavored with saffron and lychee powder; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Laddu:** sautéed balls of gram flour flavored with lychee powder and sugar; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Dosa:** a South Indian dish; a pancake made from fermented rice and *daal* batter; served with raw banana *masala*; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Idlee:** a South Indian dish; small cakes made from *suji* and curd; often dipped in *sambhar daal*; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Vada:** a South Indian dish; *urad daal* fried into circular cakes; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Sambhar Daal:** *arhaar daal* boiled and mixed with *sambhar masala*, tomato, red chili powder, bay leaf, sugar, cucumber, mustard seed, and tamarind; used for dipping.

**Coconut Chutney:** a sauce of coconut, curd, and green chilies; used for dipping; *Paryushana*-friendly.

**Green Chutney:** a sauce of coriander leaf, tomato, green chili, lemon juice, and spices; used for dipping.