

REIMAGINING GENDER IN JAIN TRADITIONS
Second Annual Conference in Jain Studies
Co-organized by
Department of Religious Studies, College of Liberal Arts
and Claremont School of Theology

April 6–8, 2025
Conference Report

Day One: Bridging Devotion and Discourse

The second annual conference in Jain Studies, titled *Reimagining Gender in Jain Traditions*, convened from April 6 to 8, 2025, and brought together scholars, students, and community members for a vibrant and critical engagement with gender in Jain traditions. Co-organized by the Department of Religious Studies at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), and the Claremont School of Theology (CST), this landmark event fostered interdisciplinary dialogue while foregrounding both classical texts and contemporary lived realities.

The conference opened at the Jain Center of Southern California (JCSC) in Buena Park, marking not only the academic beginning of the event but also a significant milestone in community-university collaboration. Reflecting the inclusive and dialogical spirit of the gathering, the day began with an event titled “CST and Jain Community Celebrate Landmark Moment in Interfaith Education.” Two ceremonial signings were held—one between CST and the Jain community, and the second between CST and the Arihanta Institute—formalizing partnerships to support Jain Studies.

The ceremony was attended by CST’s leadership and several distinguished members of the Jain community, including Dr. Jasvant Modi (past president of JCSC and lead donor of the endowed professorship), Mr. Dilip Shah and Mr. Mahesh Wadher (past presidents of JAINA), Dr. Parveen Jain (CEO of the Arihanta Institute), and Mrs. Sushama Parekh. Attended by over a hundred participants, the ceremony celebrated nearly a decade of partnership-building between CST and the Jain community. Dr. Nitin Shah, past president of JCSC and current Chair of the Academic Liaison Committee of the Federation of Jain Associations in North America (JAINA), inaugurated the event with reflections on the origins of this partnership. Dr. Sulekh Jain recalled the important role of the International School for Jain Studies (ISJS) and how many Jain scholars have participated in its immersive and experiential educational programs. The morning event ended with an invitation to a vegan lunch.

Following the lunch, Dr. Shah led a guided tour of the JCSC temple for students from CSU Long Beach and Fullerton, as well as other conference attendees. He introduced the architectural and spiritual ethos of the sacred space, emphasizing its symbolic and experiential significance.

The afternoon session formally began with a cultural invocation by the Kala Circle, a vibrant musical group based at JCSC. Through evocative storytelling and devotional music, they depicted Queen Trishala's dreams and the birth of Mahāvīra, the 24th Tīrthaṅkara. This performance established an emotionally resonant and reflective tone, highlighting the relationship between gendered devotional narratives and the philosophical themes of the conference.

Following the performance, Dr. Modi extended a warm welcome to guests, scholars, and attendees. His remarks were followed by Dr. Shivani Bothra's address, in which she expressed gratitude to Kala Circle, Southern California Jain community, CSULB, CST, and all the presenters and participants. With this, the conference's first academic roundtable was launched.

The inaugural roundtable, titled *Gender – A Useful Category for Jain Studies*, opened with foundational contributions from three distinguished scholars. John Cort (Denison University, Emeritus) offered a conceptual overview of gender as an analytical lens in Jain Studies. Manisha Sethi (Jamia Millia Islamia University) shared insights drawn from her fieldwork with over fifty Jain nuns in North and Western India, illustrating the complex negotiations between the ideal of renunciation and embodied social expectations. M. Whitney Kelting (Northeastern University) presented her current research on economic behaviour and masculinity among Pune's Jain communities, revealing how ideals of manhood shape patterns of ritual patronage and charitable giving. Collectively, these reflections foregrounded the need to expand Jain Studies beyond textual analysis and philosophical exegesis to include the social and economic dimensions of lay and ascetic lives across the gender spectrum.

Several of the questions raised during the roundtable found deeper engagement in a talk delivered by Dr Kristi Wiley (University of California, Berkeley), read on her behalf by Professor Cort, on the topic *Gender in Jain Karma Theory*. Drawing on classical Jain sources and Padmanabh S. Jaini's seminal work *Gender and Salvation* (1991), Wiley examined the karmic categories underpinning gender identity within Jain cosmology. Her presentation explored how metaphysical frameworks condition gendered embodiment and how these concepts continue to shape inclusion and exclusion in religious life.

The session was followed by a presentation by Kristi Wiley (University of California, Berkeley), read on her behalf by Professor Cort. Titled *Gender in Jain Karma Theory*, Wiley's talk examined the philosophical roots of gendered embodiment in Jain cosmology, particularly through karmic structures. Drawing on Padmanabh S. Jaini's foundational work *Gender and Salvation* (1991), Wiley addressed the metaphysical logics that undergird gender discrimination in Jain soteriology. These opening dialogues set the tone for a critical and compassionate exploration of gender in Jain traditions for the next two days.

Day Two: Academic Explorations at CSULB

Day two of the conference, held at CSULB, featured an intense schedule of keynote addresses, academic panels, and public discussion. The morning began with a keynote lecture by Professor Manisha Sethi titled *Contesting the Jain Widow's Right to Inherit: Between Autonomy and Patriline*. Through a deft combination of legal analysis and community discourse, Sethi traced the complex terrain of gendered property rights, revealing the contradictions between religious principles and evolving secular laws.

The first panel of the day, *Gendered Authority and Embodiment in Jain Traditions*, featured Ana Bajželj (University of California, Riverside), Aleksandra Restifo (Florida International University), and Steven Vose (University of Colorado-Denver). Bajželj's paper, *Defining Gender in Śvetāmbara Texts*, provided a fine-grained analysis of the taxonomies of masculinity in early Jain literature, exposing how layered classificatory schemes embed hierarchical views of manhood. Restifo challenged the Digambara stance on female liberation in her presentation, *Debating Liberation: Emotion and Courage in Women*, contrasting essentialist gender claims with textual evidence from the Śvetāmbara tradition. Vose's paper on the **choḍ paṭa**, titled *Women's Asceticism and the Economy of Merit*, traced how ritual textiles have become commemorative objects reflecting women's austerities, particularly in diaspora settings.

The second panel, *Reimagining Gender in Classical to Contemporary Jainism*, brought together research on narrative, ethics, and ecology. Miki Chase (University of Wisconsin–Madison) examined laywomen's asceticism in *Asceticism in the Margins*, arguing that the domestic sphere functions as a legitimate site of renunciatory discipline. Corbett Costello (Hamilton College) explored gender transformation in Jain retellings of Sītā in his paper *From Damsel to Devī*, highlighting the Jain appropriation of Hindu narratives for ethical instruction. Jonathan Dickstein (Arihanta Institute) presented a trans-species ethical analysis in *Gendered Duty in Jain Thought*, connecting the treatment of women and animals under patriarchal systems through the critical lens of *androfacture*.

Throughout the day, participants were served meals that reflected Jain environmental ethics. All meals provided were fully vegan, with no single-use plastics reflecting a commitment to environmental sensitivity. This ecological mindfulness was consistent with the Jain principle of *ahiṃsā* and was deeply appreciated by both academic and community attendees.

Day Three: Rituals, Reform, and Student Voices

The final day of the conference returned to the CSULB campus and presented a synthesis of historical, textual, and contemporary themes. The day opened with Christopher Chapple (Loyola Marymount University) presenting *Padmāvātī in Temple and Text*, a richly visual and textual exploration of feminine divinity in Jainism. Chapple's presentation, grounded in liturgical chants and temple iconography, demonstrated how gendered representations of the divine continue to shape devotional life.

Cogen Bohanec (Arihanta Institute) explored nineteenth-century Jain reformist discourse in his paper *Progressive Ethics and Gender Reform in Srimad Rajchandra's Nīti Bodhak*. Bohanec positioned Rajchandra's critiques of child marriage and gender inequality within the framework of religious reform and social ethics, offering a nuanced view of how spiritual teachings intersect with activist concerns.

Abhinandan Banerjee (University of California, Riverside) closed the formal academic panels with *Gendering the Uvāsagadasāo*, a critical reading of Śvetāmbara texts that revealed the absorption of Brahminical patriarchal norms. Banerjee traced the formation of Jain household ethics through the negotiation of hegemonic gender codes.

A student research panel showcased emerging voices in Jain Studies. Agni Hogaboom (Claremont and Arihanta Institute) presented on the intersections of Jain ethics and environmentalism in *Yoga and Ecology*, a case study from the Pacific Northwest. Eric Magdaleno (CSULB) offered a comparative study titled *Dissecting Gender: Jainism and Western Views*, encouraging lively discussion on the relevance of Jain perspectives in global gender discourse.

The closing session invited open dialogue on the future of Jain Studies. Discussions touched on interdisciplinarity, intersectionality, pedagogy, and community collaboration. A recitation of the *Pāraśvanātha stotra* by Dr. Sulekh Jain brought the proceedings to a reverent close.

Complementing the academic program, a curated display of mendicant objects and ritual tools added a tangible dimension to the conference. Particularly engaging for students new to Jain traditions, the exhibit offered an experiential connection to the ascetic life so central to Jain identity.

Looking Ahead

The success of the conference was made possible through the generous support of the Uberoi Foundation, the Jain community at JCSC, the Claremont School of Theology, and the Scholarly Intersections Program at CSULB. Special thanks are due to the organizing committee and volunteers who ensured the event's seamless execution.

As the community of scholars and practitioners continues to grow, the organizers announced the theme for the third annual conference: "Embodied Pluralism: Anekāntavāda from Philosophical Principles to Lived Experience."

This forward-looking theme promises to extend the rich conversation on Jain philosophy, gender, and practice into new territories of inquiry, reflection, and ethical action.



Scholars, students, and community members at the conference



Gender studies in Jainism in discussion



A curated display of mendicant objects and ritual tools