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Speak Up

THE SACRED SIXTY-THREE: RELIGIOUS EXEMPLARS IN THE SHAIVA NAYANĀRA AND JAIN ŚALĀKĀPURUṢA TRADITIONS

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The religious traditions of India have long preserved the lives of exemplary personalities in order to communicate ethical ideals, spiritual values, and collective cultural memory. Among such traditions, the 63 *nayanāras* of Tamil Shaivism and the 63 *śalākāpuruṣas* of Jainism occupy a unique and significant place. Although Shaivism and Jainism differ fundamentally in theology, philosophy, and spiritual practice, both traditions developed a sacred group of sixty-three personalities who came to embody the highest ideals of religious life. This parallel offers an important field for comparative study in the areas of religious history, sacred biography, and cultural interaction in medieval India.

At first glance, these two traditions appear to represent contrasting religious worldviews. Tamil Shaivism emphasizes intense devotion (*bhakti*) to Śiva, divine grace, and emotional surrender, whereas Jainism stresses self-discipline, nonviolence, renunciation, and liberation through *ratnatraya*, i.e. rational faith-knowledge-conduct (*samyak darśana-jñāna-cāritra*). Yet despite these theological differences, both traditions preserve a canon of exactly sixty-three exemplary personalities, suggesting a deeper structural and cultural significance.

The *nayanāras* were Tamil Shaiva saints who lived over several centuries. The 63 *nayanāras* emerged within the Tamil Bhakti movement between the 7th and 9th centuries CE. From the 10th century onward, the *nayanāras* became established as central figures of worship and devotion in Tamil Shaivism. In the 9th century CE, Sundara/Cuntaramūrti, systematized the prominent Shaivite tradition of these sixty-three devotees. After Sunadara, Nampiyāṅṭār Nambi (10th-11th century CE), the Shaivite scholar, poet, and priest expanded the list. During 10th to 12th century CE, Tamil Nadu reached a spiritual and cultural high point, often regarded as the golden age of the Bhakti movement. During this period, Cēkkilār (Sekkizhar) composed the *Periyapurāṇam*, thereby giving a definitive literary form to the Tamil Bhakti tradition.



The detail biographies of *nayanāras* are preserved in the *Periyapurāṇam*. They came from diverse social backgrounds, including kings (like Kocēṅkaṭa Cōḷa, Ninracīra Neṭumāraṇa, Kalarciṅka Nayanāra), farmers (like ḷayaṅkuṭi Māra Nayanāra), priests (like Tirujñānasambandara, Sōmāci Māra Nayanāra, Appūti Aṭikala, Nami Nandi Aṭikaḷ), hunters (like Kaṅṅappā Nayanāra), women (like Kāraikkāla Ammaiṃāra, Maṅkaiyarkkaraciṃāra), merchants (like Amaranīti Nayanāra, Kāraikkāla Ammaiṃāra, Mūrṭti Nayanāra), and marginalized communities (like Nantanāra), thereby reflecting the Bhakti ideal that devotion transcends social hierarchy and caste distinctions. Their narratives emphasize unconditional devotion to Shiva, temple worship, service to devotees, and divine grace.

In contrast, the 63 *śalākāpuruṣas* in Jain religious tradition, belong to the cosmological and universal history. The concept of these illustrious personalities in Jainism was systematized quite early in Jain universal history and cosmology, but the most influential and classical exposition is found in the works of the Jain acharyas of the early medieval period.

In the Digambara Jain tradition, one of the earliest references to the 63 *śalākāpuruṣas* occurs in the *Tiloyapaṅṅatti* attributed to Ācārya Yativṛṣabha (c. 2nd/5th century CE). Also, a detailed treatment is found in the *Mahāpurāṇa*, consisting of the *Ādipurāṇa* by Ācārya Jinasena and the *Uttarapurāṇa* by Ācārya Guṇabhadra, which narrate the lives of the 63 illustrious personalities: 24 *tīrthaṅkaras*, 12 *cakravartins*, 9 *baladevas*, 9 *vāsudevas*, and 9 *prativāsudevas*.

Similarly, in the Śvetāmbara Jain tradition, the lives of these illustrious personalities are narrated in the *Caupanna Mahāpurisa Cariya* composed by Ācārya Śīlāṅka in the 9th century CE. It mentions the *prativāsudevas* (*pratinārāyaṇas*), but it does not count them among the *mahāpuruṣas* (great men). The title itself, *Caupanna Mahāpurisa Cariya* (lives of the fifty-four great men). The fifty-four *mahāpuruṣas* are: 24 *tīrthaṅkaras*, 12 *cakravartins*, 9 *baladevas*, 9 *vāsudevas* (*nārāyaṇas*). Thus, 24 + 12 + 9 + 9 = 54, and the 9 *prativāsudevas* are excluded from the official count. However, this does not mean that Śīlāṅka ignores them altogether. They appear in the narratives connected with the *vāsudevas*, since each *vāsudevas* has a corresponding adversary, the *prativāsudeva*. Yet, Śīlāṅka treats them briefly and does not accord them the status of *mahāpuruṣas*.

Detailed accounts of *śalākāpuruṣas* in Śvetāmbara Jain tradition are found in *Triṣaṣṭi-Śalākāpuruṣa Caritra* by Ācārya Hemaçandra (12th century CE). This work subsequently became the most celebrated and authoritative literary exposition of the lives of the sixty-three *śalākāpuruṣas* in the Śvetāmbara tradition.



Unlike the historically grounded *nayanāras*, the *śalākāpuruṣas* function within a cosmic framework and symbolize moral discipline, spiritual struggle, renunciation, and liberation through self-purification.

The number sixty-three (63), therefore, emerged through the literary and devotional process of enumeration, rather than from a cosmological doctrine. A comparative reading of these traditions reveals both important differences and striking similarities. Some saints were added later to complete the traditional list. The *nayanāras* represent emotional devotion and divine grace, while the *Śalākāpuruṣas* embody ethical discipline and spiritual self-realization. The Shaiva saints are closely connected with historical Tamil society and temple-centred worship, whereas the Jain figures belong to a broader cosmological structure that transcends historical time. Despite these differences, both traditions perform similar religious and social functions. Through sacred biography, they preserve communal identity, transmit ethical teachings, inspire religious communities, and organize collective memory. Their narratives function not only as theological expressions but also as cultural instruments that shaped social values and religious consciousness in medieval India.

One of the most fascinating dimensions of this comparison is the common use of the number sixty-three. The recurrence of this number may symbolize completeness, canonical organization, or sacred classification. It may also suggest indirect cultural interaction between Jain and Shaiva traditions in South India, particularly in regions where Jainism exercised considerable intellectual and institutional influence before the rise of the Bhakti movement. Thus, the parallel understanding thought between 63 *nayanāras* and the 63 *śalākāpuruṣas* should not be viewed merely as numerical coincidence, but as evidence of a larger religious and cultural dialogue within Indian civilization. Both traditions developed structured models of ideal personalities in order to preserve faith, shape community identity, and provide accessible pathways for spiritual inspiration.

In conclusion, the 63 *nayanāras* and the 63 *śalākāpuruṣas* represent two distinct yet equally profound visions of ideal religious life in India – one centred on devotion and divine love, and the other on ethical discipline and self-realization. Nevertheless, both traditions demonstrate how sacred narratives become powerful vehicles for preserving moral values, constructing collective identity, and sustaining religious continuity across generations. Their comparative study not only deepens our understanding of Shaiva and Jain traditions but also highlights the dynamic interaction, coexistence, and intellectual richness of medieval Indian religious culture.
