

# UNVEILING EMPOWERED WOMEN IN JAIN HERITAGE: UNTOLD STORIES OF STRENGTH AND WISDOM

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## Abstract

*The rich heritage of empowered Indian women, with special reference to Jain texts, has often been overlooked despite their profound impact. In an effort to shed light on this, I humbly aim to bring forth the narratives of some lesser-known iconic women who have played pivotal roles in shaping our history.*

*While Gargi, Maitreyi, and Lopamudra are familiar names, women such as Brahmi, Sundari, and Chandan Bala remain relatively unknown to many. Women have consistently constituted the keystone in the arch of Indian society since time immemorial. Even if we look at the Indus Valley Civilization, women enjoyed positions of power and prestige.*

*When considering societal status, it's fascinating to note that in the Samavsharan (divine preaching hall) of Tirthankaras, which traditionally consisted of twelve chambers, six were reserved for women attendees. Two notable women from Jain history are Brahmi and Sundari, the daughters of the first Jain Tirthankara, Rishabhdev. They both played pivotal roles in initiating new skill sets, with Rishabhdev imparting knowledge of alphabets to Brahmi and knowledge of numbers to Sundari. Brahmi is credited with the origin of the Brahmi script, while Sundari is acknowledged for propagating numerical skills. We talk about women empowerment today but aren't Brahmi and Sundari the finest examples of empowered women?*

*Jain texts mention "Solah Sati," 16 virtuous women who continue to serve as role models. These women exemplify strong virtues essential for navigating the complexities of life in any era. Chandan Bala, initially a princess who later became a slave due to the downfall of her father's kingdom, showcases resilience, equanimity, positivity, compassion, integrity and devotion. Despite her challenges, she emerged as the chief disciple of Lord Mahavira. Her extraordinary skills and virtues are commendable and crucial for anyone striving for a comfortable and empowered life. These narratives offer insights that are crucial for addressing contemporary issues, including learning the art of manoeuvring smoothly through worldly turmoil, especially amidst the increasing stress among the masses.*

**Keywords:** Empowered women, heritage, women empowerment, historical perspective

## INTRODUCTION

Despite their profound impact, the narratives of our ancient iconic women have remained underrepresented. I have made a humble attempt to bring this to the forefront. I have tried to present the rich heritage of empowered Indian women with special reference to Jain texts.

### What Is Empowerment

Empowerment in general means having the freedom or authority to do something and not being dependent. Being empowered means having power and control over one's life. With empowerment comes equal opportunities.

Women's empowerment is their ability to determine their own choices, and their right to influence social change for themselves as well as for others. It is about promoting their sense of self-worth and also positioning them in leadership roles for decision making. There are numerous examples from history where women have played a critical role in running kingdoms and empires.

Women empowerment is an essential factor that works for the betterment and development of any society.

### Historical Perspective

If we look at ancient history, women have held positions of power and prestige. When we talk about **equal opportunities** and women's status in society, one will be amazed to know that in the Samavsharan (the divine preaching hall) of Tirthankars, which classically had 12 chambers, six were reserved for women attendees. Thus, they enjoyed equal rights. Chandanbala who was a slave girl at one time of her life rose to the position of chief disciple of Tirthankar Mahavir. Thirthankar Rishabhdev had 101 sons and two daughters Brahmi and Sundari. For the purpose for initiating the new skill sets he chose Brahmi and Sundari over his 101 sons. This itself shows the strong position and **innate capabilities of women**. Within the Indus Valley society, women enjoyed power and respect both. The worship of the mother goddess by the Indus people signifies the substantial role women held in society, indicating a matriarchal structure. Women enjoyed equal treatment alongside men within the societal framework.

Ancient history is replete with such empowered women who continue to inspire us even today. Although many know about Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra etc., names of Brahmi, Sundari, Chandan Bala etc. are not known to many. As examples of the ideal Jain women, the list of 'Solah Sati' is an important part of daily recitations of not only the laypersons but all the saints also.

ब्राह्मी चंदनबालिका भगवती, राजीमती द्रोपदी!  
कौशल्या च मृगावती च सुलसा, सीता सुभद्रा शिवा !!  
कुन्ती शीलवती नलस्यदयिता, चूला प्रभावत्यपि  
पद्मावत्यपि सुन्दरी प्रतिदिनं , कुर्वन्तु नो मङ्गलं !! <sup>1</sup>

Many of these Solah Sati are known in Hindu culture as well. A Sati is a virtuous woman, usually showing her virtue through fidelity. In Hindu contexts, this faithfulness centres around her husband, but in Jain contexts it conveys unshakable value system and right belief.<sup>2</sup> These virtuous women provide us with beautiful insights through their narratives. I am just telling about few of them in brief.

Chandanbala was born as Vasumati to King Dadhivahan and Queen Dharini of Champapuri. Her father faced defeat in one territorial war. In an attempt to escape, she and her mother were captured by an enemy soldier. Facing the common practice of selling captives as slaves during those times, Vasumati found herself in the slave market. Observing her noble appearance and demeanour, a compassionate wealthy merchant Dhanavah purchased her. He hoped to reunite her with her parents someday. The merchant told his wife Moola to treat Vasumati as their daughter and named her as Chandanbala. Moola noticed the good looks of Chandanbala, became suspicious of her husband's motive and started worrying that her husband might dump her and marry Chandanbala. Moola's jealousy escalated and one day while her husband was out of town, she confined Chandanbala in isolation. Her head was shaved, she was tied with shackles and was deprived of food and water for three days. Despite this, Chandanbala maintained composure, reflecting on her changed life without harbouring any resentment towards Moola.

When the merchant returned, he observed the absence of both his wife and Chandanbala. He learned about the situation from a loyal servant. Without delay, he released Chandanbala. Recognizing her hunger, he provided her boiled lentils, the only cooked food available in the house at that time. He went to fetch more food and a blacksmith to remove the shackles. Chandanbala, in her benevolence, decided that she will eat the lentils only after offering them to a Sadhu first. Mahavir Swami happened to come there. He was fasting since five months and twenty-five days because no one was able to meet the specific conditions that he was holding in his mind regarding accepting food. Her situation fulfilled those unique conditions, Mahavir Swami broke his long fast, Chandanbala was praised by celestial gods. Eventually she too chose path of renunciation. Her story exemplifies resilience, benevolence and patience among adversity. Despite her own pitiful situation, she didn't let go of her values championed by Jainism and this led her to liberation. She led a group of 35000 nuns which is indicative of her strong abilities and leadership skills. (Depiction of various stages in life of Chandanbala)



It's pertinent to look at the excerpts from Adi Puran, (a 9<sup>th</sup> century work depicting life of Tirthankar Rishabhdev) which indicates about **the importance of girl education**. It indicates that attaining education paves the way for a fulfilling life.

ॐ षोडशं पत्रं ३५५

इत्ं बभूवन्मभेद्भिर्दुःखीकर्मवर्षिणाम् । विद्यायां श्रेष्ठिभूष्येत सफलं जन्म १नामिदम् ॥१०॥  
 विद्यायां पुरुषो लोके २संसतिं याति कीर्तिदः । मारी च ३सहृती धत्ते स्त्रीमृष्टेरभिमानं पद्म् ॥१०८॥  
 विद्या यथास्करी पुंसां विद्या श्रेयस्करी मता । सम्यगाराधिता विद्यादेवता कामदायिनी ॥१०९॥  
 विद्या कामदुहा भेनुविद्या चिन्तामणिर्गुणाम् । ४शिवसंकलितां सूते विद्या संपत्परम्पराम् ॥११०॥  
 विद्या मनुष्य मित्रं च विद्या कल्याणकारकम् । सहपाणि धनं विद्या विद्या सर्वार्थसाधनी ॥१११॥  
 ५तद्विद्यामहं पतं पुत्रिके कुटुम्बे पुषाम् । ससंमहणकालोऽयं युवयोर्वर्षेऽनुना ॥११२॥  
 इत्युक्त्वा मुहुराशास्य विस्तोत्रे हेम ६पटके । अविद्यास्य स्वधिसस्योऽसुतदेवी ७सपर्यया ॥११३॥  
 विभुः करद्वयेनाभ्यां लिखन्क्षरमाशिकाम् । उपादिशतिवि ८संख्यास्थानं ९श्याङ्कैरनुक्षमात् ॥११४॥  
 ततो भगवतो बभूवः १०श्याङ्कैरनुक्षमात् । सिद्धं नम इति उक्त्वा मङ्गलां सिद्धमातृकाम् ॥११५॥  
 अकारादिहकारान्तां शृङ्गां मुक्त्वा चलीमिव । स्वस्थमज्जलभेदेन द्विधा भेदमुपेयुषीम् ॥११६॥  
 ११अयोगवाद्दपर्यन्तां सर्वविद्यासु संतताम् १२संयोगाक्षरसंभूतिं १३श्रेष्ठमाक्षरैश्चिताम् ॥११७॥

(Adi Puran by Jinasena, page 355)<sup>3</sup>

Brahmi and Sundari were the two daughters of the first Tirthankar Rishabhdev. From a young age, Rishabhdev educated both of them and soon they became very knowledgeable in various fields. With his right hand he taught alphabets that's why scripts are written from left to right. He taught numbers with his left hand and that is the reason why we first write units, then tens, then hundreds and so on (right to left). Brahmi is credited with 18 scripts, and Sundari became a proficient mathematician. All historians and linguists unanimously agree that Brahmi is the oldest script of this world. The origin of Brahmi script is to Brahmi's credit. They both were **pioneers**. They were empowered women indeed.



(Depiction of Rishabhdev imparting alphabet and number knowledge to Brahmi Sundari)  
 Brahmi became the first Sadhvi (female Jain ascetic) and led a group of three lakh Sadhvis during period of Tirthankar Rishabhdev. Sundari became the first Shravika (Jain laywoman). Thus, they assumed **leadership positions** as well.  
 Brahmi and Sundari played the **role of motivator** also. Bahubali, their bother, was engaged in intense meditation but had yet to attain Keval Gyan (omniscience). Brahmi and Sundari noticed this and gave him the following advice, "You cannot achieve enlightenment while sitting on an elephant. You need to get off the elephant." In a metaphorical sense, they were telling him to shun his ego in order to progress spiritually. Upon hearing their insightful words, Bahubali was finally able to attain omniscience.

**Lessons From These Iconic Women:**

While the stories of remarkable women such as Chandanbala, Brahmi, Sundari, Kunti, Kaushalya, Sita, Mrigavati and others might appear simple, the messages they convey are indeed deeply profound.

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The real significance lies in exploring more profound aspects and analysing their reactions to life's challenges. These reactions mirror their praiseworthy inner state, at the same time providing us some valuable insights to influence our daily conduct.

They all accepted the path of self-control (Sanyam). **Self-control** is essential virtue even for an ordinary human being to maintain healthy, disease free and balanced life.

Kaushalya didn't harbour any ill feelings towards Kaikeyi nor did she ever advise her son against Kaikeyi. Displaying traits of a high value woman, she did not let external stressors ruffle her feathers.

Mrigavati teaches us the virtue of **forgiveness**, accepting our faults and seeking forgiveness, being humble and not harbouring undue egos. It's important to ask for forgiveness instantly without waiting for the 'right moment'. As a tight knot becomes much more difficult to untangle later on. Without accepting our mistakes and taking corrective steps, we keep doing the same mistakes over and over again.

In general, they are known for their selflessness, patience, and endurance.

Women have consistently exhibited remarkable strength, and while this doesn't always refer to physical prowess, their strength of character is consistently worth emulating and that's what the 'Solah sati' symbolize. They epitomize the greatest virtues that one can ever imagine.

Their characters portray **equanimity, resilience, courage, strength and devotion** in the face of miseries, jealousy, anger and hatred. They had firm **unshaken value system and right belief**.

Sita was true to her values even though she was kidnapped and was in an unsafe psychological state. She did not break her vows even in the most adverse situations. She had **patience** and faith in the God and her husband. Sita, a princess raised in utmost luxury, accepted the 'vanvas' (forest stay) without hesitation. Draupadi demonstrated unwavering devotion, patience, and faith. Chandanbala shows **compassion and benevolence** by offering food to sadhu even when she was starving herself.

**Acceptance** was another trait they exemplified. It's inevitable to avoid difficulties, but true winners are those who navigate challenges with resilience. The way they respond to adversity and their acceptance of whatever unfolds makes all the difference. The true measure of a person is revealed in unfavourable conditions. Each of these women demonstrated remarkable resilience, enduring the test of time. King Shrenik followed Buddhism while his wife queen Chelna followed Jainism. The king's choice of Buddhism did not hinder the queen from steadfastly following her own faith, distinct from her husband's. This highlights **the freedom of expression** enjoyed by women back then. It is very important for women today to keep striving for the values that they hold dear and have a never give up attitude.

### **When an Ordinary Woman Unveils Superior Military Strategy**

Chanakya is credited with unparalleled strategies. But it's interesting to know that after the initial defeats when he was hiding from Nand armies, he took shelter in a small cottage. The old lady of the house served piping hot Khichdi to her child who

burnt his fingers. And then the witty comment of that ordinary woman (You are foolish like Chanakya to take khichdi from the middle, don't you know you should take from the outer sides first) gave Chanakya a crucial strategy to capture the frontiers first instead of eyeing the capital directly. Grateful for the insightful lesson, he expressed his gratitude to the woman. She effortlessly giving him a supreme military strategy which later changed the course of history. Women brain has always been guiding those in powerful positions.

In Jain traditions, Tirthankars are the most revered ones but they are known by their mothers' names. E.g. "Trishla nandan Mahavir" (Mahavir, the son of Trishla)

In all religious ceremonies also, women hold special position. Many things cannot be Initiated unless done by women. Tirthankar's mother holds a special position.

### **Women are creators, women are protectors.**

I would like to quote 5<sup>th</sup> verse from Bhaktamar Stotra which is a famous Jain prayer composed by Acharya Mantunga in 7<sup>th</sup> century CE.

सोऽहं तथापि तव भक्ति-वशान्मुनीश!  
कर्तुं स्तवं विगत-शक्ति-रपि प्रवृत्तः ।  
प्रीत्यात्म-वीर्य-मविचार्य मृगी मृगेन्द्रम्  
नाभ्येति किं निज-शिशोः परिपालनार्थम् ॥5॥<sup>4</sup>

In short, this verse from Bhaktamar tells the unwavering love, courage and strength of a mother when it comes to saving her child from any difficult or dangerous situation.

### Equal distribution of wealth

Adi Puran clearly mentions about the equal division of wealth among sons and daughters. This notably establishes that women enjoyed equal rights, something which was reestablished only in the recent past through courts of law. Adi Purana was composed by Jinasena (a Digambara monk) as a Sanskrit poem praising the life of first *Tirthankara*, Rishabhanatha. According to Jain tradition, it was composed in 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. <sup>5</sup>

#### पुत्री को समान धन-विभाग

आदिपुराण में गृहत्याग क्रिया के प्रसंग में धन संविभाग का निर्देश करते हुए लिखा है—

“एकैऽप्यो धर्मकार्येऽतो द्वितीयः स्वगृहस्थये ।  
तृतीयः संविभागाय भवेत् स्वत्सहजन्मनाम् ॥  
पुत्र्यश्च संविभागार्हाः समं पुत्रैः समांसकैः ।”

Excerpt from Adi Puran by Jinasena <sup>6</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Each story from history conveys moral values which can shape our life. That is how we can derive the most benefit and enrich our lives. In today's day and age also, women have been reaching great heights, but along with extraordinary feats come certain side effects. It's not uncommon to see broken families, high stress-levels, dissatisfaction and a multitude of other problems. Somehow, somewhere there has been a degeneration of moral values that our ancient women had. It's time to introspect and take a leaf out of the books of these women from history to enhance the quality of our lives in the truest sense. These women didn't allow others to disturb their tranquillity. But what do we do today? Our emotions are controlled by others and by the reactions that we get by them. In life, we frequently encounter challenging situations and may struggle to maintain patience and equanimity. There are instances where we tend to overreact and assign blame to external factors, thereby causing ourselves unnecessary pain and distress. These women exemplify the behaviour that is worth emulating, providing a valuable model for everyone to look up to.

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