

BHAGWAAN MAHAVIR
LECTURE IN JAIN STUDIES

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Jainism, the Caste System, and a History of the Jain Sacred Thread Ceremony

Introductions to Jainism typically emphasize how the tradition at its inception in the fifth century BCE rejected the caste system established by brahmins, members of the priestly caste who can be identified by sacred threads (*yajñopavīta*) draped over their left shoulders. Scholars have shown, however, how Jains have adopted their own understandings of caste, and to this day, in various Jain communities, lay Jains undergo sacred thread investiture ceremonies, adopting the sacred thread most famously only worn by dominant-caste male Hindus. This talk will draw upon fieldwork in Mumbai and an examination of Jain texts to present the beginnings of a history of the Jain sacred thread ceremony, showing its connection to a modern festival called Rakṣā Bandhan, “Tying the Thread.” In Hindu communities today, Rakṣā Bandhan is a day when sisters tie a thread on their brothers’ wrists to protect them, but in Digambara Jain communities, they tie threads to mendicants’ brooms to protect them. Both practices, we will see, are replications of sacred thread-tying ceremonies.

Feb. 20, 2024
5:30 pm CT

Herring Hall
Room 100

and via
ZOOM

THE BHAGWAAN MAHAVIR LECTURE SERIES IN JAIN STUDIES IS INTENDED TO DEEPEN THE GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING OF JAINISM AS A RELIGION AND CULTURE. THIS LECTURE IS ORGANIZED BY THE CHAO CENTER FOR ASIAN STUDIES WITH THE SUPPORT OF MEMBERS OF THE JAIN COMMUNITY.



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