

# Chapter I Foundations of Ritual Authority and Institutional Consolidation

## 1.1 Introduction and Rationale

Jainism occupies a distinctive position in the religious traditions of South Asia (Dalal, 2010, pp. 302–325; Long, 2009, pp. 117–118). As part of the broader *śramaṇa* milieu<sup>1</sup>, it articulates a non-theistic metaphysics, an uncompromising ethic of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), and a soteriology grounded in disciplined self-transformation without recourse to divine intervention (Dundas 2002, pp. 1-11; Jaini 1979, pp. 1-20). Central to Jain philosophy is the assertion that all living beings possess an eternal soul (*jīva*) capable of liberation through the integration of right faith, knowledge, and conduct (*samyag-darśana*, *samyag-jñāna*, *samyag-cāritra*),<sup>2</sup> with liberation (*mokṣa*) understood as the complete dissociation of the soul from karmic matter (for the ritual implications of this framework, see §4.2).<sup>3</sup>

This doctrinal framework is resistant to hierarchy rooted in birth (Jaini 1979, pp. 2-20; Dundas 2002, pp. 147-149). Liberation is neither mediated by priestly intercession nor restricted by hereditary entitlement. Canonical texts consistently redefine spiritual authority in ethical terms, privileging ascetic discipline and self-restraint over genealogical status (*Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* 25.19–20; Dundas 2002, pp. 16-18).

Yet the historical and Contemporary terrain of Jain communities presents a more complex picture. In Karnataka, hereditary temple ritual specialists—commonly referred to as "Jain Brahmins"—perform daily worship (*pūjā*), conduct consecration rituals, preserve liturgical knowledge, and maintain enduring associations with specific temple

---

<sup>1</sup> The term *śramaṇa* (Skt. "one who strives or toils") refers to a renunciant ascetic in the non-Vedic traditions of ancient India. The *śramaṇa* movement, which emerged in the Gangetic plain around the sixth to fifth centuries BCE, encompassed Jainism, Buddhism, and Ājīvikism, among other heterodox currents, in distinction from the Brahmanical (Vedic) ritual tradition. See Bronkhorst (2007), Greater Magadha, for a comprehensive reassessment.

<sup>2</sup> *Tattvārtha Sūtra* 1.1:

सम्यग्दर्शनज्ञानचारित्राणि मोक्षमार्गः

*samyag-darśana-jñāna-cāritrāṇi mokṣa-mārgaḥ*

<sup>3</sup> *Tattvārtha Sūtra* 10.2:

बन्धहेत्वभावनिर्जराभ्यां कृत्स्नकर्मविप्रमोक्षो मोक्षः

*bandha-hetv-abhāva-nirjarābhyāṃ kṛtsna-karma-vipramokṣo mokṣaḥ*

institutions. These roles are frequently transmitted across generations and are locally recognized as legitimate (Babb 1996, pp. 108–112; Cort 2001, pp. 105–109). Fieldwork survey data gathered for this study (Chapter 6, §6.3) confirm a strong normative preference for lineage-based ritual authority: over 90% of respondent households reported engaging only hereditary priests for temple ceremonies.<sup>4</sup>

Coexistence of doctrinal egalitarianism and hereditary ritual custodianship raises a central analytical problem (cf. Cort, 2001, pp. 105–109; Dundas, 2002, pp. 118-120, 125-129; Laidlaw, 1995, pp. 48–64): what conceptual space in Jain philosophy permits such differentiation, and what historical and institutional processes enabled its consolidation in Karnataka?

This study addresses these questions through an integrated analysis of doctrinal sources, historical materials, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted across Karnataka between 2023 and 2025. It argues that the category "Jain Brahmin" operates primarily as a social translation, not a doctrinal equivalence — denoting hereditary ritual custodianship within a Hindu-majority cultural environment while the underlying metaphysical framework continues to reject birth-based spiritual hierarchy. Hereditary Jain Brahmins, on this account, represent a historically shaped institutional adaptation operating within the conventional (*vyavahāra*) sphere of Jain religious life. Their authority is institutional and functional — grounded in ritual competence, genealogical continuity, and communal recognition — not metaphysical or salvific.

By situating hereditary priesthood (*paurohitya*) under doctrinal constraints and regional historical developments (see Chapter III, §§3.2–3.4 for detailed lineage analysis), this dissertation demonstrates how religious authority is negotiated and stabilized in an ascetic tradition that affirms ontological equality.

The central research question guiding this study is: how did hereditary Jain Brahmin priesthood in Karnataka emerge, consolidate, and persist within a tradition whose

---

<sup>4</sup> The household survey instrument was administered across six of the seven fieldwork visits (visits 2–7, March 2023–December 2025); the initial September 2022 visit predated the formal survey instrument. Of 342 entries in the dataset, 162 represent substantively completed questionnaires (defined as responses with 15 or more survey fields completed). The response count (N) varies by question due to partial completion; for each statistic cited, the question-specific N is reported. The complete questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix A.

foundational doctrines deny birth-based spiritual authority? This question is pursued along four interrelated dimensions: doctrinal (how classical texts construct and constrain ritual authority), historical (how dynastic patronage and institutional developments stabilized hereditary custodianship), sociological (how contemporary Jain Brahmins negotiate priestly authority, community identity, and professional modernity), and terminological (how the category "Jain Brahmin" can be precisely defined in relation to both Brahmanical priesthood and Jain ascetic ideals). These questions are formally articulated in §1.6.3 below.

What follows is organized as follows. Section 1.2 examines the doctrinal foundations of authority in Jain thought, tracing how canonical and philosophical texts redefine spiritual hierarchy in ethical rather than hereditary terms. Section 1.3 reconstructs the institutional consolidation of Digambara Jainism in Karnataka from early medieval patronage through *bhaṭṭāraka* administration and early-modern codification. Section 1.4 analyses caste adaptation, lay patronage, and the internal differentiation of priestly roles. Section 1.5 addresses ritual practice, embodied authority, and contemporary negotiations of priestly legitimacy. Section 1.6 situates the study within Jain studies scholarship, consolidates the theoretical framework, and outlines the methodological architecture. Section 1.7 offers comparative reflections on authority, institutionalization, and hereditary office. Section 1.8 summarizes the chapter and previews the dissertation's subsequent trajectory.

## 1.2 Doctrinal Foundations of Authority in Jain Thought

A sustained analysis of hereditary ritual authority in Jainism requires careful attention to the doctrinal frameworks through which authority, hierarchy, and spiritual eligibility are conceptualized. Instead of assuming a simple opposition between egalitarian doctrine and social stratification, this study examines how Jain philosophical categories define the terms under which such differentiation occurs.

Jain metaphysics relocates the basis of hierarchy from birth and ritual privilege to discipline, knowledge, and karmic condition, thereby establishing a model of authority grounded in ethical and epistemic criteria (Jaini 1979, pp. 2-19; Dundas 2002, pp. 86-89). The following sections outline key doctrinal resources that structure this model and provide the conceptual basis for understanding the later emergence of hereditary ritual roles.

### 1.2.1 Ascetic Authority and the Ethical Reinterpretation of *Brāhmaṇa*

The early canonical literature presents asceticism as the primary locus of religious authority. The *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, among the oldest strata of Jain scripture, constructs spiritual distinction through renunciation and non-violence in place of ritual mediation (Jacobi 1968, Part I). Mahāvīra is depicted not as a priestly intermediary but as an embodied exemplar of restraint and radical detachment, whose authority derives from disciplined conduct and progressive dispossession. Early passages repeatedly emphasize the renouncer's withdrawal from social identity: the ascetic abandons familial ties, status markers, and possessions in pursuit of liberation (*Ācārāṅga Sūtra* 1.2–3, pp. 1-41)<sup>5</sup>.

As modern scholarship has observed, Jain canonical texts ground religious authority in ascetic performance and ethical self-mastery instead of hereditary or sacrificial privilege (Dundas 2002, pp. 16-17; Jaini 1979, pp. 27-35). Religious distinction, in this framework, is achieved rather than ascribed.

This model displaces priestly mediation from the center of religious authority and establishes ascetic discipline as the normative benchmark against which all other forms of religious role and practice must be understood.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* 1.2–3, trans. Hermann Jacobi, *Jaina Sūtras, Part I, Sacred Books of the East, Vol. 22* (New York: Dover Publications, 1968; orig. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884).

Jain canonical literature introduces a significant reorientation of the category *brāhmaṇa*, shifting its basis from hereditary status to ethical and ascetic attainment. Rather than rejecting the term outright, early Jain texts retain the category while redefining its criteria in accordance with the broader Jain emphasis on conduct and non-violence, most clearly articulated in sources such as the *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* <sup>6</sup>(see Chapter II for detailed analysis).

Within this framework, spiritual distinction is grounded in disciplined conduct, the conquest of passions, and adherence to *ahiṃsā*. The authority that Brahmanical normative texts ascribe to brahminhood based on birth and Vedic learning (Olivelle, 2004, pp. 497–498; Doniger, 2009, pp. 118–122) is thus relocated from genealogical privilege to ethical achievement, allowing Jainism to engage a socially powerful category without endorsing its Brahmanical theological foundations (Jaini 1979, pp. 290-295; Dundas 2002, pp. 12-15).

Jain doctrine permits the conceptual redefinition of brahminhood without affirming hereditary hierarchy. The detailed textual and philosophical implications of this redefinition are examined in Chapter II.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* 25.19–20

न जच्चा होति ब्राह्मणो, न जच्चा होति अब्राह्मणो ।

कम्मुना ब्राह्मणो होति, कम्मुना होति अब्राह्मणो ॥

Na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo, na jaccā hoti abrahmaṇo;

kammunā brāhmaṇo hoti, kammunā hoti abrahmaṇo.

Not by birth does one become a *brāhmaṇa*,

nor by birth does one become a non-*brāhmaṇa*.

by conduct (*karma*) one becomes a *brāhmaṇa*,

by conduct one becomes a non-*brāhmaṇa*.

### 1.2.2 Knowledge Transmission and the *Niścaya–Vyavahāra* Distinction

The doctrinal emphasis on knowledge and disciplined conduct also generates a practical requirement: the preservation and transmission of religious knowledge in the community. Ritual procedure and liturgical correctness depend upon trained agents capable of maintaining and transmitting these forms of knowledge across generations (Jaini 1979, pp. 27–35).

In early Jain contexts, this function was primarily associated with ascetic teachers such as *ācāryas* and *upādhyāyas*, whose authority derived from mastery of doctrine and exemplary conduct not hereditary status (Dundas 2002, pp. 181-184). As Jain communities developed stable temple institutions and increasingly routinized forms of worship, however, the transmission of ritual and liturgical knowledge required more continuous, locally embedded forms of custodianship (Cort 2001, pp. 104–108).

Structurally, this requirement provides an important link between doctrinal principles and institutional developments. While Jain metaphysics does not sanction hereditary spiritual authority, the need to preserve and transmit knowledge creates space for specialized roles within the *vyavahāra* domain. The historical consolidation of such roles, including hereditary ritual specialists, is examined in the following sections.

A key doctrinal resource for understanding the coexistence of spiritual equality and social differentiation in Jainism is the distinction between the ultimate standpoint (*nīścaya-naya*) and the conventional standpoint (*vyavahāra-naya*), most systematically articulated in Digambara<sup>7</sup> philosophical traditions. From the standpoint of *nīścaya*, the self (*jīva*) is pure consciousness, unconditioned by social identity, status, or institutional role. From the standpoint of *vyavahāra*, however, embodied existence unfolds through structured roles and relational distinctions that organize social and religious life (Jaini 1979, pp. 321-324; Dundas 2002, pp. 107-110).

This distinction allows Jainism to accommodate forms of social differentiation without attributing them ultimate spiritual significance. Roles such as teacher, lay practitioner, administrator, or ritual specialist may operate meaningfully at the conventional level while remaining subordinate to the goal of liberation. Social identity, including categories associated with Brahminhood, belongs to the realm of *vyavahāra* and does not determine the intrinsic nature or spiritual potential of the soul.

The *nīścaya-vyavahāra* framework provides the conceptual mechanism through which hereditary ritual roles can be understood as institutionally valid yet doctrinally limited. It allows for the recognition of specialized functions in Jain communities without endorsing hereditary spiritual hierarchy. The fuller philosophical implications of this distinction, particularly in relation to the redefinition of brahminhood, are examined in Chapter II.

### 1.2.3 *Karma, Guṇasthānas*, and Adhikāra: Gradation Without Birth Hierarchy

Jain *karma* theory provides a further basis for understanding differentiation within an otherwise egalitarian metaphysical framework. The condition of the soul (*jīva*) at any given moment is determined by the accumulation and transformation of karmic matter, which shapes embodiment, experience, and spiritual capacity across successive lives (Jaini 1979, pp. 99-103; Dundas 2002, pp. 97-101).

This model establishes a form of hierarchy grounded in karmic condition not fixed social identity. Differences in knowledge and spiritual advancement are understood as contingent and reversible, subject to the ongoing processes of karmic influx (*āsrava*), bondage (*bandha*), stoppage (*saṃvara*), and shedding (*nirjarā*). For a full discussion of these karmic mechanisms, see §2.4. Social status, therefore, cannot be treated as an intrinsic or permanent attribute of the self.

---

<sup>7</sup> Digambara (Skt. "sky-clad") is one of the two principal sectarian divisions of Jainism, the other being Śvetāmbara ("white-clad"). The division, which crystallized by the early centuries of the Common Era, centres on ascetic practice—Digambara monks renounce all clothing as an expression of complete non-possession—as well as doctrinal differences concerning the scriptural canon, the spiritual capacity of women, and the nature of omniscience. The Jain communities of Karnataka are predominantly Digambara.

This framework reinforces the non-essential character of social differentiation in Jainism. While roles and distinctions may emerge within the *vyavahāra* domain, they do not correspond to stable or ontologically grounded hierarchies. Spiritual mobility remains theoretically open to all beings, irrespective of birth or social location.

#### 1.2.4 Ascetic–Lay Complementarity and Institutional Necessity

Jainism has long recognized a functional distinction between ascetic and lay modes of religious life, each governed by distinct obligations and capacities. Ascetics pursue the path of complete renunciation, while lay practitioners (*śrāvakas*) participate in religious life through moderated ethical observance, ritual practice, and sustained support of the monastic community (Dundas 2002, pp. 187-189; Jaini 1979, pp. 161-170).

This differentiation does not constitute a fixed social hierarchy but reflects varying degrees of engagement with the ascetic ideal. Lay participation is not peripheral but structurally integral, sustaining temple institutions, ritual practices, and the transmission of religious knowledge in the community (Cort 2001, pp. 105–109; Helmuth von Glasenapp 1999, pp. 367–371).

The distinction matters because it shows that Jainism accommodates differentiated religious roles in the domain of everyday practice without collapsing them into a single model of ascetic authority. It is within this broader field of differentiated practice that specialized ritual functions, including those associated with hereditary Jain Brahmins, become intelligible.

Jain doctrine further articulates spiritual differentiation through the schema of the *guṇasthānas*, or stages of spiritual development, which map the progressive purification of the soul (*jīva*) from delusion to liberation (Jaini 1979, pp. 141-146; Dundas 2002, p. 151, p. 194). These stages provide a graded framework for understanding variations in knowledge and ethical attainment on the path to liberation.

Crucially, the *guṇasthānas* do not correspond to social identity or institutional role, but to the degree of karmic purification and right conduct.

This framework reinforces the distinction between spiritual gradation and social differentiation. While Jain communities may exhibit structured roles at the *vyavahāra* level, these do not correspond to the stages of spiritual advancement articulated in doctrinal models such as the *guṇasthānas*.

The concept of *adhikāra*<sup>8</sup> further clarifies the basis of authority in Jain thought by emphasizing eligibility grounded in knowledge, discipline, and competence over inherited status. Religious functions whether teaching, interpretation, or ritual performance are ideally entrusted to those who possess the requisite understanding and training, not those who merely occupy a particular social position (Jaini 1979, pp. 259-260; Dundas 2002, pp. 150, 181-184).

This principle reinforces the distinction between qualification and designation. Authority is not an intrinsic attribute of a lineage or category, but a conditional recognition based on demonstrated capability in specific domains of practice. In this sense, *adhikāra* operates in the *vyavahāra* sphere, regulating who may legitimately perform certain roles without conferring ultimate spiritual superiority.

The notion of *adhikāra* is particularly significant for understanding the emergence of hereditary ritual specialists. While Jain doctrine does not sanction hereditary entitlement to religious authority, the institutional need for trained ritual practitioners allows competence to become associated, over time, with particular lineages. The relationship between qualification and heredity, however, remains contingent upon context rather than fixed by doctrine.

A persistent tension in Jain history concerns the relationship between renunciatory ideals and institutional permanence. Ascetics are normatively itinerant and bound by the principle of non-possession (*aparigraha*).<sup>9</sup> Temple institutions, by contrast, require fixed locations, property management, endowments, and the regular performance of rituals.

Structural tension of this kind generates differentiated domains of responsibility. Ascetics preserve doctrinal authority and exemplify renunciation, while lay communities sustain institutional continuity through patronage, administration, and ritual organization (Dundas 2002, pp. 187-188; Cort 2001, pp. 113–117). Within this division

---

<sup>8</sup> *Adhikāra* (Skt. "authority, entitlement, competence") in Jain usage denotes eligibility for a particular religious function grounded in demonstrated knowledge, moral discipline, and ritual proficiency. The term contrasts with hereditary entitlement or caste-based claims to ritual office. In broader Sanskrit usage, *adhikāra* can also signify jurisdiction, chapter division, or right of performance.

<sup>9</sup> The principle of non-possession (*aparigraha*) is articulated as foundational to Jain monasticism in the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* I.2.3 (Jacobi, 1968, pp. 45–66) and codified systematically in the *Tattvārtha Sūtra* 7.12 (Tatia, 1994). Its implications for institutional life—particularly the impossibility of monastic property management—are central to understanding why lay ritual specialists became necessary.

of labor, temple-based ritual specialists emerge as functionaries who maintain daily worship and liturgical order without assuming salvific authority.

The doctrinal emphasis on *aparigraha* limits the extent to which ascetics can directly manage property or assume long-term custodianship of temple assets. Practical responsibilities fall to lay administrators and, in some contexts, to hereditary ritual specialists. Hereditary custodianship may accordingly be understood not as a theological claim to superiority, but as an institutional solution to the problem of sustaining permanent religious infrastructure in a renunciatory tradition.

### 1.3 Institutional Consolidation of Digambara Jainism in Karnataka

If doctrinal analysis establishes the conceptual limits of authority in Jainism, historical inquiry explains how those limits were inhabited and negotiated in practice. Karnataka provides one of the most significant regional contexts for understanding the institutional consolidation of Digambara Jainism. Its dense inscriptional record, monumental temple complexes, long-standing pilgrimage centers, and documented patterns of royal and mercantile patronage render it indispensable for tracing the emergence of hereditary ritual custodianship.

#### 1.3.1 Early Medieval Patronage and Monumental Institutionalization

Consolidation of Jain institutions in Karnataka can be traced to early medieval patronage under the Western Ganga dynasty (c. fourth–tenth centuries CE). Numerous inscriptions, collected in *Epigraphia Carnatica* (EC (NS) II, rev. ed. R. Narasimhachar, Mysore, 1973, No. 544, Intro. p. lxxxii; No. 150, Intro. p. lxxxiv)<sup>10</sup>, document land grants to Jain *basadi*s and provisions earmarked for ritual performance. These records show that Jain communities were deeply embedded in the political and agrarian economy of the region (for a comprehensive survey of Western Gaṅga royal patronage of Jainism, see Pinto, 2025, pp. 209–211).

Royal patronage did not entail theological subordination; rather, it facilitated institutional stabilization. Temple construction required land and sustained revenue

---

<sup>10</sup> The inscriptions cited are as follows. No. 544 (c. 884–885 CE): the earliest datable Ganga record at Śravaṇabeḷagoḷa, from the fifteenth regnal year of Satyavākya Permannādi (Rīchamalla II). No. 150 (c. eleventh century): records that Jinadēvaya, son of Cāmuṇḍarāya, caused a Jaina temple to be erected at Beḷgoḷa. All references are to EC (NS) II, rev. ed. R. Narasimhachar (Mysore, 1973).

streams. Endowments frequently generated agricultural income designated for maintenance, ritual materials, and temple personnel. Over time, such arrangements transformed Jain temples from sites of episodic devotion into durable institutional centers integrated into local revenue systems (Dundas 2002, pp. 123, 195-197; Cort 2001, pp. 105-109).

The Rāṣṭrakūṭa dynasty (eighth-tenth centuries) and Hoysala dynasty (eleventh-fourteenth centuries) continued and expanded these patterns of patronage. Inscriptions record Jain generals, ministers, and mercantile elites sponsoring temple construction and establishing endowments for ongoing ritual obligations (EC (NS) II, rev. ed. R. Narasimhachar (Mysore, 1973), Nos. 38 (Intro. p. lxxxv), 163 (Intro. p. lxxxvi), 162 (trans. pp. 419-420), 275 (trans. p. 450), 476 (Intro. p. lxxxix)<sup>11</sup>; Dundas 2002, pp. 118, 125-129). These patronage networks created a durable infrastructural foundation upon which temple-centered ritual life depended and within which specialized ritual roles could gradually stabilize (Cort 2001, pp. 107-111).

Śravaṇabeḷagoḷa<sup>12</sup> offers a paradigmatic illustration of institutional consolidation in medieval Digambara Jainism. The installation of the colossal Bāhubali (*Gommaṭeśvara*) image in 983 CE under the patronage of the Western Ganga dynasty general Cāmuṇḍarāya symbolized both devotional aspiration and advanced institutional coordination. Monumentality presupposes maintenance. The statue and its surrounding complexes required ongoing ritual care, periodic large-scale ceremonies such as the

---

<sup>11</sup> The five inscriptions span six centuries of Jain patronage at Śravaṇabeḷagoḷa. No. 38 (c. eighth century): a Rāṣṭrakūṭa-period land grant by Kambhayya to a Jaina preceptor, with boundary enumeration. No. 163 (982 CE): epitaph of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa prince Indra IV, who performed *sallekhana* at Śravaṇabeḷagoḷa. No. 162 (1123 CE, Śaka 1046): queen Sāntaladēvi erected the Savatigandhavāraṇa Jina temple and granted village Mettenāḍa tax-exempt for worship and food, together with a tank for oblation and a fifty-kolaga garden. No. 275 (c. 1163 CE): minister Hullamayya caused village Savagāḍu to be granted for the *aṣṭavidha-pūjā* of Gommaṭadēva, Pārśvadēva, and twenty-four *Tīrthaṅkaras*, and for feeding ascetics. No. 476 (c. 1159 CE): general Hullarasa granted villages Savagāḍu, Bekka, and Keggare to Gommaṭeśvara and renovated multiple basadis. All references are to EC (NS) II, rev. ed. R. Narasimhachar (Mysore, 1973).

<sup>12</sup> Śravaṇabeḷagoḷa (Kannada: "the monk on the white pond") is a major Digambara Jain pilgrimage centre in Hassan district, Karnataka. The site is renowned for the 17.4-metre monolithic statue of Bāhubali (*Gommaṭeśvara*), commissioned in 983 CE, and hosts the *Mahāmastakābhīṣeka* ceremony approximately every twelve years. It remains an active centre of Digambara monastic and institutional life.

*mahāmastakābhiṣeka*, and sustained administrative oversight (Del Bonta 1981, pp. 54–63; Dundas 2002, pp. 120, 224–226; Hegewald 2025, pp. 80–82).

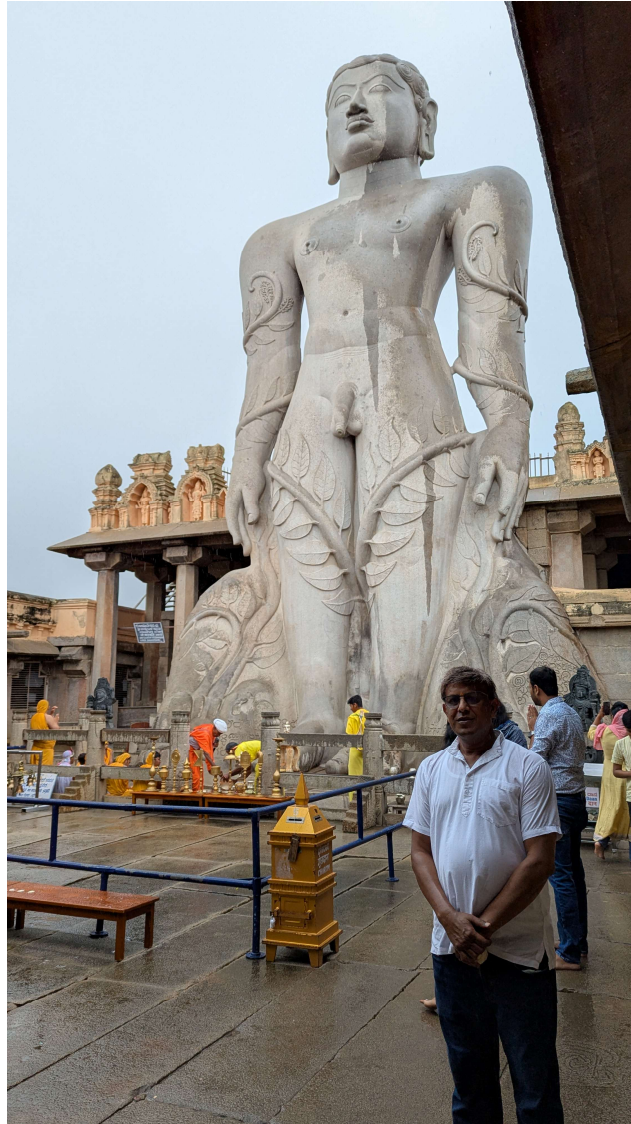
Inscriptions from Śravaṇabelagoḷa, many recorded in EC (NS) II, rev. ed. R. Narasimhachar (Mysore, 1973), Nos. 275 (trans. p. 450), 162 (trans. pp. 419–420), 324 (Intro. p. xci), 176 (trans. pp. 432–434), pp. 35–95, frequently specify donations earmarked for particular ritual acts, including the lighting of lamps, provision of flowers, daily *abhiṣeka*, and the observance of annual festivals (Detige 2019b, pp. 278–279 (Western-Indian parallels); EC (NS) II (1973), Nos. 275, 162, 324, 176, pp. 35–95)<sup>13</sup>. Such specificity indicates that ritual performance was not incidental but economically embedded in systems of agrarian endowment and revenue allocation (Dundas 2002, pp. 123–124; Cort 2001, pp. 105–109). The economic structure of such endowments is detailed in a note.<sup>14</sup>

Embedding ritual obligation within economic endowment generated structural incentives for continuity. Monumental worship could not depend upon sporadic patron participation; it required stable custodianship and clearly defined responsibility in the temple complex.

---

<sup>13</sup> The four inscriptions illustrate the specificity of ritual endowments at Śravaṇabelagoḷa. No. 275 (c. 1163 CE, trans. p. 450): the *aṣṭavidha-pūjā* (eight kinds of worship) of Gommaṭadēva and twenty-four *Tirthaṅkaras*, with gifts of food to ascetics. No. 162 (1123 CE, trans. pp. 419–420): worship and food to an assembly of ascetics, construction of a tank for oblation, and provision of a garden. No. 324 (1827 CE, Intro. p. xci): endowment of one hundred *varahās* by Kṛṣṇarāja-vodēya III for annual ceremonies and *mastakābhiṣeka* to Bāhubali. No. 176 (1131 CE, trans. pp. 432–434): donations for the worship of Jinās and regular feeding of ascetics. All references are to EC (NS) II, rev. ed. R. Narasimhachar (Mysore, 1973).

<sup>14</sup> A grant for lamp lighting, for example, presupposed cultivation of endowed land, collection of produce, and regular execution of the ritual act. Donor intention was publicly memorialised in inscriptional form; continuity of performance was institutionally expected (Dundas, 2002, p. 123). Such stipulations indicate that ritual maintenance was not incidental but structurally embedded in agrarian revenue systems.



**FIGURE 1.1: MONOLITHIC IMAGE OF GOMMAṬEŚVARA (BĀHUBALI) AT ŚRAVAṆABELĀGOḶA — THE SITE WHOSE MEDIEVAL PATRONAGE ECONOMY ANCHORS THE INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY TRACED IN §1.3.1. AUTHOR’S PHOTOGRAPH, MARCH 2023.**

### 1.3.2 Temple Economy and the *Bhaṭṭāraka* Institution

As temple networks expanded across medieval Karnataka, differentiation of roles became structurally inevitable. Lay elites frequently managed financial resources, supervised land endowments, and oversaw construction projects recorded in inscriptional sources. Ascetics, bound by vows of non-possession (*aparigraha*) and often itinerant, could not permanently administer temple property or assume responsibility for daily ritual maintenance (Dundas 2002, pp. 187-188, 195-197; cf. Jaina Education Committee 2013).

Institutionally, this configuration produced a functional gap between ascetic doctrinal leadership and temple-based ritual continuity. Resident specialists were required to ensure that daily worship was carried out without interruption. Their responsibilities included preparation of ritual materials, recitation of prescribed formulae, maintenance of icons, calendrical calculations for festival observance, and coordination of ceremonial events (Cort 1998, pp. 59–76).

Over time, families associated with temple service accumulated technical expertise and reputational legitimacy in local communities. Instruction frequently occurred through apprenticeship in the household, enabling continuity of liturgical knowledge and procedural precision. Children raised within temple environments absorbed ritual choreography through sustained participation. In such contexts, functional specialization could gradually stabilize into hereditary transmission through institutional pragmatics rather than doctrinal mandate (Cort 1998, pp. 77–92).

The *Bhaṭṭāraka* institution occupied a central position in the institutional history of Digambara Jainism (the institution is examined in full in §2.3) in Karnataka and the Deccan. *Bhaṭṭārakas* were celibate clerical heads presiding over monastic seats (*maṭhas*), responsible for manuscript preservation, doctrinal supervision, and authorization of icon consecrations (Dundas 2002, pp. 123–125; Zydenbos 2006a, pp. 45–46; Hegewald 2025, pp. 50–53). Unlike fully itinerant mendicants, they maintained stable institutional centers and exercised regional religious authority.

Scholarly accounts emphasize that *Bhaṭṭārakas* functioned primarily as custodians of textual learning and institutional oversight, distinct from daily ritual officiation. Zydenbos (2006a, pp. 45–46) likewise characterizes the *Bhaṭṭāraka* seat as a centre of doctrinal custodianship and manuscript transmission rather than routine liturgical performance, a pattern that left day-to-day temple duty to resident householder specialists. Fieldwork conducted in Karnataka suggests that *Bhaṭṭārakas* do not ordinarily perform routine temple *pūjā* themselves, a practice locally explained in terms of ascetic discipline and concerns regarding ritual action and potential *hiṃsā*. Their role is more commonly described by interlocutors as supervisory and administrative managing *maṭha* finances, coordinating temple networks, and maintaining scholastic continuity.

Local custodianship operates alongside centralized authority. In many temples, hereditary Jain Brahmin families perform daily worship, recite liturgical texts, maintain icons, and calculate calendrical observances (Cort 2001, pp. 105–109; confirmed by field interviews, 2023–2025). In contrast, at Sonda *maṭha* (North Karnataka), where a hereditary priestly community is not consistently available, students enrolled in the *maṭha's gurukula* are trained to conduct temple *pūjā*. According to field interviews<sup>15</sup>, this training equips students with functional ritual competence but does not replicate the extended, lineage-based apprenticeship that interviewees consistently associated with hereditary Jain Brahmin households (see Chapter III, §3.3.3). The difference is one of pedagogical depth and intergenerational immersion; it does not amount to a claim of ritual legitimacy.

Such variation illustrates the adaptive character of Digambara institutional life. Ritual performance emerges not as a fixed theological entitlement but as a role configured in response to regional resources, educational structures, and community needs. The layered coexistence of centralized *Bhaṭṭāraka* oversight, hereditary temple service, and *gurukula*-based ritual training illustrates differentiated yet interdependent spheres of authority in contemporary Jain practice.

### 1.3.3 Routinization of Practice and Early-Modern Codification

Modern scholarship has shown that image worship and temple ritual constitute integral components of Jain religious life and do not mark a deviation from ascetic ideals (Cort 2011, pp. 88–100). Daily *pūjā*, periodic *abhiṣeka*, and elaborate consecration (*pratiṣṭhā*) ceremonies developed in sustained interaction with monastic traditions, producing a devotional sphere structurally embedded in Jain institutional life.

As devotional practice became regularized, procedural precision acquired increasing importance. Consecration rituals required careful adherence to prescribed sequences and calendrical calculation. Major festivals demanded coordination among ritual

---

<sup>15</sup> Gaṅgādharendra Sarasvatī Svāmī of the Mutt was contacted by the author in September 2025 to learn about the Gurukula students' involvement in priesthood. The observation was discussed with Jain Brahmin *Purohitas* Chaitanya Paṇḍita and Rajendra Paṇḍita amongst others and documented in fieldwork data.

specialists and lay participants. In such contexts, ritual knowledge became increasingly specialized and codified (Davis 2024, pp. 42–68).

Max Weber's theory of routinization provides a useful analytical lens for interpreting this development (Weber 1978, pp. 241–254). Charismatic or exemplary religious impulses, once institutionalized, are stabilized through procedural regulation and administrative structures. In the Jain case, the routinization of devotional practice did not displace ascetic authority but operated alongside it. Regularized ritual performance strengthened the position of trained specialists capable of ensuring continuity and technical correctness.

Routinization, however, does not in itself mandate hereditary transmission. It creates structural incentives for stable expertise. Whether such expertise becomes genealogically consolidated depends upon regional social organization, educational structures, and patterns of patronage.

Early modern developments introduced political and economic realignments that altered established patterns of patronage in Karnataka. As royal sponsorship declined or became less centralized, mercantile, and lay elites increasingly assumed responsibility for temple administration. Committee-based structures emerged in certain contexts to oversee finances and regulate ritual expenditure. These developments did not eliminate hereditary service roles but repositioned them in more formally organized systems of collective oversight.

During the nineteenth century, colonial and princely administrative reforms further encouraged documentation and procedural clarity. The recording of temple assets, endowments, and service tenures required identification of individuals or families responsible for specific ritual obligations. In the Mysore region, the development of the Muzarai administrative apparatus brought many temples under structured state supervision.<sup>16</sup> Regulations governing religious endowments necessitated the

---

<sup>16</sup> The Mysore Religious and Charitable Endowments Regulations, enacted in stages under princely Mysore administration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, formed part of the broader Muzarai framework governing religious institutions. These regulations required systematic documentation of temple property, endowments, and service tenures, thereby rendering customary roles including hereditary ritual offices administratively legible within a state-supervised structure.

documentation of officeholders and service rights, rendering customary arrangements administratively legible in a bureaucratic framework (for the parallel South Indian pattern of bureaucratic codification of religious endowments, see Appadurai, 1981, pp. 139–164). In cases of dispute, lineage continuity could serve as evidence of established entitlement.

As Nicholas Dirks has argued in the broader South Indian context, colonial governance frequently translated flexible social practices into legally codified and administratively bounded categories (Dirks 2001, pp. 43–50; for the application of this argument to Muzrai-era restructuring, see Chapter VI, §6.6). While the Jain case must be examined through localized archival

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hereditary Jain Brahmins in Karnataka operated in a multilayered institutional framework: community recognition, committee governance, *Bhaṭṭāraka* oversight in certain regions, and administrative codification under Muzrai supervision (see also Chapter VI, §6.6.5)<sup>17</sup>. This stabilization did not originate in colonial intervention; hereditary custodianship had earlier roots in temple-based specialization. However, bureaucratic recognition likely reinforced existing patterns and clarified service rights into the modern period.

The Emergence of hereditary Jain Brahmins in Karnataka cannot be attributed to doctrinal innovation. Core Digambara commitments ontological equality of souls and karmically determined spiritual hierarchy remained unchanged (Jaini 1979, pp. 343-372; Dundas, 2002, pp. 123-125, 138-140). Rather, hereditary custodianship developed within the institutional sphere in response to regional historical conditions.

Royal patronage, temple endowments, routinized devotional practice, *Bhaṭṭāraka* mediation, and later administrative codification collectively fostered the genealogical

---

<sup>17</sup> These inscriptions demonstrate the economic structuring of ritual obligation. No. 275 (c. 1163 CE, trans. p. 450): revenue of village Savagāḍu allocated for the aṣṭavidha-*pūjā* and feeding of ascetics. No. 162 (1123 CE, trans. pp. 419–420): village Mettenāḍa granted tax-exempt, with a fifty-kolaga wet-land garden and tank, the revenue designated for worship and oblation. No. 351 (1723 CE, Intro. p. xci): Dodda-Kṛṣṇarāja granted eight named villages and Kasabē Bēḷguḷa for worship and offerings to Gommaṭeśvara, together with village Kabāle for a feeding house. No. 475 (1398 CE, Intro. p. lxxx): under Bukka I (Vijayanagara), a levy of one haṇa per Jaina household was stipulated for the renovation of ruined Jinalāyas. All references are to EC (NS) II, rev. ed. R. Narasimhachar (Mysore, 1973).

stabilization of ritual specialists (Detige, 2019a, pp. 18–19; Sangave, 1980, pp. 293–305; Chavan, 2005, pp. 88–138). Monumental centers such as Śravaṇabeḷagoḷa required sustained ritual maintenance and procedural continuity, encouraging the consolidation of specialized expertise in particular families.

Within the *vyavahāra* sphere of Jain religious life, hereditary custodianship provided institutional stability and technical competence. Metaphysical egalitarianism remained intact, while pragmatic differentiation evolved in response to historical and administrative pressures.

### 1.3.4 Epigraphic Evidence and Customary Ritual Rights

Epigraphic records from Karnataka contain detailed stipulations concerning ritual obligations attached to land grants. Inscriptions collected in *Epigraphia Carnatica* (EC (NS) II, rev. ed. R. Narasimhachar (Mysore, 1973), Nos. 275 (trans. p. 450), 162 (trans. pp. 419–420), 351 (Intro. p. xci), 475 (Intro. p. lxxx))<sup>18</sup>, frequently specify that revenue from designated fields be allocated for lamp lighting, daily *pūjā*, *abhiṣeka*, or the observance of particular festivals. Such provisions show that ritual continuity was economically structured and legally articulated in temple endowment systems.

In certain cases, inscriptions identify named individuals responsible for executing ritual duties or supervising endowed services. While these references do not always explicitly designate hereditary succession, recurring family names across successive records may suggest patterns of custodial continuity (Detige, 2019a, pp. 18–19). The inscriptional linkage between donor intent, endowed revenue, and named functionaries indicates that ritual performance was not episodic but institutionally maintained.

Epigraphy provides material evidence for the gradual stabilization of ritual roles in particular familial or local networks. Detige (2019a, pp. 18–19) draws similar inferences from the Western-Indian *bhaṭṭāraka* corpus, reading recurrent donor-and-beneficiary

---

<sup>18</sup> Three inscriptions illuminate the *devadāna* system at Śravaṇabeḷagoḷa. No. 357 (1422 CE, Intro. p. xc): the Vijayanagara commander Irugapa-daṇḍanātha II donated the village of Beḷgoḷa for the perpetual enjoyment of Gommaṭeśvara — a classic *devadāna* grant. No. 352 (1636 CE, Intro. p. xci): King Chimamārija-vodēya VII redeemed the temple lands of Gommaṭeśvara from mortgage, demonstrating ongoing royal oversight of *devadāna* administration. No. 485 (1636 CE, Intro. p. xci): a copper-plate record stipulating that temple servants must not mortgage *devadāna* lands again — an administrative safeguard for endowment integrity. All references are to EC (NS) II, rev. ed. R. Narasimhachar (Mysore, 1973).

formulas as indicators of customary continuity in ritual office even where hereditary succession is not explicitly named. Although inscriptional records alone cannot conclusively establish hereditary transmission in every instance, they document the structural conditions under which genealogical custodianship could emerge and solidify. Temple lands (*devadāna* grants) were not merely symbolic donations, but constituted revenue-generating assets tied to ritual obligation. Inscriptions from Karnataka record allocations of cultivable land whose produce was designated to sustain daily worship and festival observances (Epigraphia Carnatica, EC (NS) II, rev. ed. R. Narasimhachar (Mysore, 1973), Nos. 357 (Intro. p. xc), 352 (Intro. p. xci), 485 (Intro. p. xci); e.g. No. 357, dated 1422 CE, records the donation of the village of Beḷgoḷa for the perpetual service of Gommaṭeśvara; No. 352, dated 1636 CE, documents the redemption of mortgaged temple lands by King Chimamārija-vodēya VII)<sup>19</sup>. The management of such endowments required administrative coordination: trustees or lay supervisors oversaw revenue collection, while ritual specialists ensured that endowed worship was properly executed (Tiwary 2001, pp. 118–132).

Where ritual performance was structurally linked to endowed income, questions of entitlement could arise. Service rights attached to particular temples often carried economic implications, and disputes over performance or revenue allocation required adjudication. In such contexts, hereditary succession could function as a practical criterion for establishing precedence. A lineage that had demonstrably performed daily *pūjā* over successive generations might claim customary authority grounded in continuity of service (Carrithers 1991, p. 277).<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> See Michael Carrithers and Caroline Humphrey (eds.), *The Assembly of Listeners: Jains in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), especially chapters 2–4, for analysis of how authority within Jain communities is negotiated through practice, recognition, and communal discourse rather than solely through formal doctrinal prescription. Although the ethnographic focus is on western India, the discussion of customary legitimacy and ritual responsibility offers a comparative framework for understanding the stabilization of service rights in other regional Jain contexts.

<sup>20</sup> In classical Indian social thought, *varṇa* refers to the fourfold categorical classification of society (*brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, *śūdra*) as articulated in Brahmanical normative texts, while *jāti* designates the endogamous occupational groupings that constitute the operative units of caste in social practice. The two terms are analytically distinct: *varṇa* is a prescriptive textual category, *jāti* a social-structural reality. Jain communities, while doctrinally rejecting *varṇa* hierarchy, have historically organized along *jāti* lines.

Hereditary priesthood need not be understood as the product of formal doctrinal authorization. It may instead have crystallized through processes of customary recognition, revenue-linked obligation, and dispute resolution in temple economies. Epigraphic and administrative records suggest that genealogical stabilization often followed institutional practice in the absence of theological prescription.

### 1.3.5 Decline of *Bhaṭṭāraka* Authority and Local Stabilization

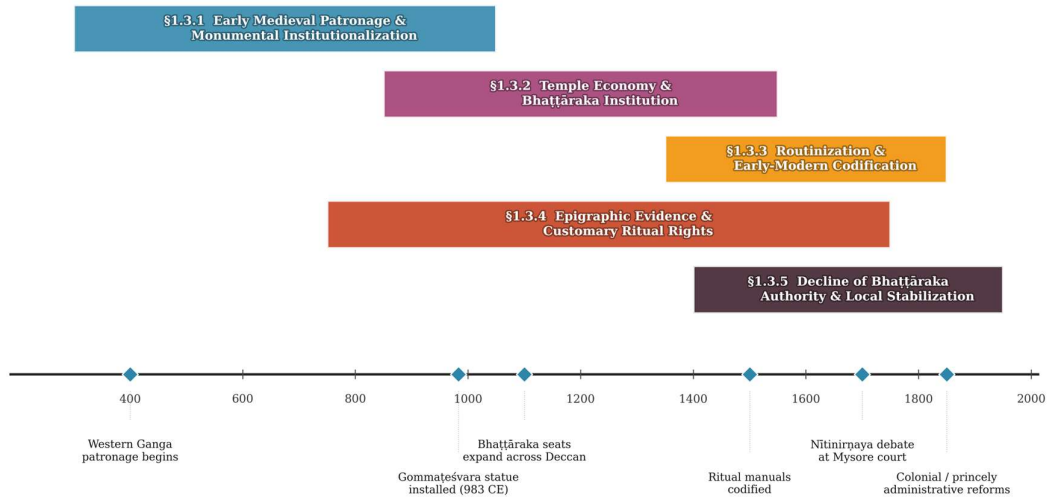
In certain regions of Karnataka, the influence of *Bhaṭṭāraka* seats appears to have diminished during the late medieval and early modern periods, particularly in contexts marked by political transition and shifting patterns of patronage. Reformist critiques directed at clerical accumulation of wealth and institutional centralization, documented in regional histories, may have contributed to this reconfiguration of authority.

Such developments did not eliminate the symbolic or scholastic importance of the *Bhaṭṭāraka* institution, but they may have reduced the extent of direct supervisory control over temple-level affairs. Where centralized oversight became attenuated, local custodians, especially hereditary ritual specialists assumed greater practical responsibility for ensuring ritual continuity and coordinating festival observances.

Redistribution of functional authority did not represent doctrinal rupture. Rather, it reflects the elasticity of Jain institutional structures. As regional centers of clerical authority fluctuated in strength, temple-based custodianship could stabilize at the local level. In this way, lineage-based ritual service may have consolidated not through theological endorsement, but through the gradual localization of institutional responsibility.

## Institutional Consolidation of Digambara Jainism in Karnataka

*c. 4th–19th century · Trajectory traced across §1.3.1–§1.3.5*



**FIGURE 1.2: INDICATIVE TIMELINE OF INSTITUTIONAL CONSOLIDATION OF DIGAMBARA JAINISM IN KARNATAKA, C. 8TH–19TH CENTURY, SUMMARISING THE TRAJECTORY TRACED ACROSS §1.3.1–§1.3.5.**

### 1.4 Caste Adaptation, Lay Patronage, and Intra-Priestly Differentiation

Historical consolidation of temple institutions in Karnataka unfolded in a broader social environment structured by caste differentiation and regional endogamy. Although Jain doctrine does not articulate a theological defense of *varṇa*<sup>21</sup>-based<sup>22</sup> hierarchy (Jaini 1979, pp. 343-366; Dundas, 2002, pp. 147-149), Jain communities have long operated in

<sup>21</sup> Digambara narrative and normative texts do contain discussions of *varṇa*. In Jinasena’s *Ādipurāṇa*, Ṛṣabhadeva is described as instituting social differentiation, including a fourfold *varṇa* structure, to regulate worldly order. Later works such as the *Rājāvalī Kathāsāra* reiterate this motif. Furthermore, prescriptive texts like the *Traivarṇikācāra* outline expected conduct for the three higher *varṇas* within Jain lay society. These formulations, however, concern social organization and ethical regulation rather than birth-based restriction of spiritual attainment. Jain soteriology continues to ground liberation in karmic purification and discipline rather than hereditary entitlement.

<sup>22</sup> Whether jāti organization among Jain communities represents an adoption of surrounding Brahmanical social structures or an independent institutional development remains debated. Sangave (1980, pp. 209) argues that Jain castes arose primarily through the absorption of pre-existing Hindu jātis upon conversion, retaining their endogamous and occupational boundaries. Dundas (2002, pp. 147-149) and Cort (2001, pp. 57–60) offer a more nuanced view: that caste-like formations among Jains developed through regional economic specialization and marriage networks that, while structurally parallel to Hindu caste, operated without the Brahmanical theological apparatus of *varṇāśramadharmā*. For the Karnataka context specifically, see Nair (2022) on the intersection of Jain mercantile identity and ritual patronage.

caste-organized social formations. A clear analytical distinction must be maintained between doctrinal commitments and sociological practice.

Karnataka lineages should not be interpreted as a straightforward doctrinal inheritance from Brahmanical models of ritual authority. Rather, they represent a socially embedded institutional formation that emerged in Jain communities responding to regional patterns of patronage and temple economy. The designation "Jain Brahmin" reflects processes of occupational consolidation and community acceptance; it carries no theological endorsement of hereditary spiritual privilege.

Understanding this distinction allows hereditary priesthood to be situated within the sphere of social practice of Jain social life, where differentiation may occur without contradicting the metaphysical equality of souls affirmed in Jain soteriology.

#### 1.4.1 Jain Communities and Caste-Structured Society

Jain communities have historically participated in endogamous marriage networks and occupational clustering<sup>23</sup>, particularly among mercantile groups whose economic organization fostered dense kinship ties and patterns of collective patronage (Sangave 1980, pp. 209; Shah 2004, pp. 45–63). Such formations appear to have been shaped less by explicit scriptural mandate than by regional settlement patterns, commercial interdependence, and the logic of trust in trading networks.

Jain metaphysics does not incorporate the Brahmanical doctrine of ritual pollution as an ontological principle. Spiritual capacity and the possibility of liberation are not restricted by birth but determined by karmic condition and ethical discipline (Jaini 1979, pp. 27-30; Dundas 2002, pp. 147-149). Nevertheless, social differentiation may arise independently of theological doctrine. Marriage patterns, inheritance practices, and occupational

---

<sup>23</sup> Fieldwork visits were as follows: (1) September 2022: Mysuru — a *gṛha-praveśa* ceremony hosted at the researcher's new residence and officiated by Nuthan A. Paṇḍita and his team; the first ethnographic encounter with Jain Brahmin priesthood, which catalysed the study; (2) March 2023: Mysuru, Cāmarājanagara, Kanakagiri, and Wayanad — interviews with elderly priests and direct observation of ritual duties and priestly lifestyle; (3) January 2024: Mysuru area — continued interviews and observation; (4) November–December 2024: Udupi area and Mysuru — further interviews and site visits; (5) May 2025: Mysuru and Śravaṇabelagoḷa — detailed ritual observation, collection of *paddhati* manuscripts, survey administration, and library consultation; (6) September 2025: Mysuru — additional survey data collection and ritual observation; (7) December 2025: Mysuru — participatory ritual engagement.

specialization contribute to durable group consolidation. Over time, such differentiation can acquire normative force in communal discourse, even where it lacks explicit doctrinal grounding (Jaini, 1979, pp. 87-88).

Hereditary ritual specialists must be situated within this broader matrix of social organization. Their emergence reflects processes of occupational stabilization and genealogical continuity within caste-structured society rather than a theological assertion of birth-based spiritual hierarchy.

#### 1.4.2 Lay Patronage and the Division of Institutional Authority

Merchant elites in Karnataka were central to sustaining Jain temple institutions. Donations of land, sponsorship of temple construction, funding of festivals, and support of monastic and ritual personnel generated both religious merit and social prestige in mercantile networks (Singh 2008, pp. 112–138; Sangave 1980, pp. 221–226). Patronage operated simultaneously as devotional offering and as a mechanism of communal influence.

Administrative authority frequently resided with lay trustees drawn from these mercantile groups. Trustees supervised finances, managed endowed lands and regulated temple property. Ritual specialists, by contrast, exercised authority over liturgical performance and ceremonial correctness (Cort 2001, pp. 113–117).

Such a configuration produced a differentiated yet interdependent institutional structure: economic and administrative control on one side, ritual, and liturgical specialization on the other. Patronage required ritual execution to fulfill donor intention, while ritual performance depended upon material endowment and administrative oversight (Dundas 2002, pp. 123-124, 200-211).

Within this division of authority, hereditary priesthood took shape. Whereas trusteeship could shift with changing patterns of wealth and leadership, ritual continuity depended upon stable transmission of technical knowledge. Lineage-based custodianship offered procedural reliability and accumulated expertise in temple-centered devotional systems (Singh 2008, pp. 145–152).

#### 1.4.3 From Occupational Role to Lineage Identity

Functional specialization does not automatically produce hereditary office. The transition occurs when repeated association between particular families and ritual roles

generates communal expectation of continuity. In Karnataka's temple networks, such expectation was reinforced through apprenticeship in priestly households. Children acquired *mantras*, ritual sequencing, calendrical knowledge, and embodied discipline from elders, facilitating smooth succession and minimizing institutional disruption (Singh 2008, pp. 145–152).

Marriage within priestly circles further consolidated group identity. Endogamy preserved ritual knowledge within familial lines and reinforced internal cohesion. Over time, occupational designation gradually crystallized into lineage identity, as ritual competence became associated not merely with training but with family affiliation.

Paralleling broader sociological patterns, occupational groups stabilize through genealogical transmission and status closure (Weber 1978, pp. 926–939). In the Jain context, however, such stabilization did not entail doctrinal claims of spiritual exclusivity. Jain soteriology consistently grounds liberation in karmic purification and ethical discipline independent of birth status (Jaini 1979, pp. 27-35; Dundas 2002, pp. 97-101). Ritual authority rested on technical competence, continuity of service, and community acceptance — not metaphysical superiority. Lineage consolidation emerged as an institutional mechanism for preserving procedural precision and liturgical reliability across generations.

#### 1.4.4 Symbolic Capital and Ritual Legitimacy

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital — developed in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* and elaborated in *Language and Symbolic Power* — provides a productive framework for interpreting how intergenerational lineage and ritual expertise operate in Jain temple institutions (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 172–183; 1991, pp. 116–120). Within a religious field, symbolic capital accrues when a lineage becomes associated with procedural correctness and historical depth. Devotees and trustees may prefer priests whose families maintain long-standing ties to a particular temple, perceiving continuity as a marker of authenticity and trustworthiness.

Such symbolic capital reinforces ritual legitimacy without requiring theological justification. A hereditary priest need not claim metaphysical superiority; legitimacy instead emerges through collective acknowledgment of disciplined training and accumulated expertise. Such authority is socially constituted and reproduced through repeated performance.

Claims of ritual "purity" in priestly discourse may function less as ontological assertions and more as boundary-maintaining strategies. Purity can signify adherence to prescribed procedures, intergenerational lineage, or disciplined conduct. In this sense, purity discourse distinguishes trained custodians from occasional or untrained performers while remaining distinct from Jain metaphysical conceptions of karmic purity (Cort 2011, pp. 91–98).

#### 1.4.5 Intra-Priestly Differentiation: *Indras* and *Upādhyāyas*

In Karnataka, the designation "Jain Brahmin" most commonly refers to the dominant hereditary priestly lineage examined in this study. The broader field of Jain ritual specialists, however, includes additional groups differentiated by region, lineage history, and institutional affiliation.

The *Indras* are primarily associated with western Karnataka and have historically been linked to particular temple networks. They perform ritual functions comparable to other Jain priests, including daily *pūjā*, *abhiṣeka*, and festival observances. Regional accounts note their distinct genealogical traditions and temple affiliations in western Karnataka (Diwakar, 1968, pp. 45–65; Hampa Nagarajaiah, *Spectrum of Classical Literature in Karnataka*, Vol. 5, pp. 130–131). Figure 1.3 shows a practicing *Indra*.

**FIGURE 1.3:**  
**PRIEST AT THE**  
**THE SHRINE OF**



**INDRA LINEAGE**  
**ENTRANCE TO**  
**ŚRĪ**

**ANANTANĀTHA TĪRTHAÑKARA, VĀRANGA JAIN TEMPLE, UDUPI DISTRICT, KARNATAKA.**  
**PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN BY ME DURING FIELDWORK IN MARCH 2023.**

The *Upādhyāyas* are concentrated in southern Mahāraṣṭra and adjoining border regions extending into northern Karnataka. While the term *upādhyāya* in classical Jain monastic taxonomy denotes a scriptural preceptor, in regional practice it may refer to hereditary ritual specialists. Their ritual repertoire overlaps substantially with that of other Jain

priestly lineages, yet marriage networks, lineage histories, and regional affiliations remain differentiated (Diwakar 1968, pp. 370–400).

Community discourse may include evaluative comparisons concerning ritual precision, genealogical antiquity, or regional prestige. Such comparisons function as mechanisms of intra-group boundary maintenance and status differentiation; they are not expressions of doctrinal divergence. All these groups operate in the same Digambara theological framework, even as their social identities and institutional trajectories remain regionally distinct.

#### 1.4.6 Synonymy and Analytical Precision

In contemporary Karnataka, the dominant hereditary priestly lineage under study is frequently treated in common discourse as synonymous with "Jain Brahmins." The designation functions as a socially recognizable category in temple administration and lay usage. However, in broader or less precise contexts, the label may occasionally extend to include other ritual specialists such as *Indras* or *Upādhyāyas*, thereby blurring internal distinctions.

For analytical clarity, this study employs the term "Jain Brahmin" in a restricted sense to denote the dominant Karnataka-based hereditary lineage that most consistently defines the category in regional discourse. *Indras* and *Upādhyāyas* are examined comparatively where relevant to clarify patterns of differentiation and avoid categorical conflation. As Sabine Scholz has demonstrated in her study of Digambara communities in South Mahāraṣṭra and North Karnataka, collective religious identities emerge through historical processes of negotiation, consolidation, and boundary formation rather than through fixed doctrinal definition (Scholz, 2011b, pp. 6–10).

Recognizing intra-priestly diversity prevents essentialization and reveals the historical contingency of hereditary ritual authority. Terminological precision is methodological: it enables careful differentiation between regional identity formation, occupational specialization, and theological categories.

#### 1.4.7 Differentiation Without Metaphysical Hierarchy

Hereditary Jain Brahmins in Karnataka illustrate how functional specialization can coexist with doctrinal egalitarianism. Jain metaphysics denies intrinsic spiritual superiority based on birth and locates hierarchy instead in karmic condition and ethical

discipline (Jaini 1979, pp. 27-35; Dundas 2002, pp. 97-101). Yet communal religious life requires structured roles and ritual specialization.

Critically, the distinction lies between metaphysical hierarchy and functional distinction. In Karnataka, hereditary priesthood belongs to the latter domain. Its legitimacy rests upon ritual competence, lineage continuity, and community acceptance without claims of salvific mediation. Priests do not function as intermediaries who control access to liberation; instead, they ensure the orderly execution of temple-centered devotional practice within this *vyavahāra* sphere.

Recognizing this distinction allows hereditary custodianship to be understood not as a doctrinal anomaly, but as a historically conditioned institutional adaptation. The coexistence of metaphysical equality and genealogical office thus forms the central analytical tension explored in the chapters that follow.

## 1.5 Ritual Practice, Embodied Authority, and Contemporary Negotiation

While doctrinal analysis and historical reconstruction illuminate the structural conditions under which hereditary Jain Brahmins emerged, ethnographic attention to ritual practice reveals how authority is enacted and negotiated in lived religious space. Temple ritual is not merely a sequence of prescribed acts; it is a performative domain in which hierarchy, service, discipline, and legitimacy are embodied and reproduced through repeated practice (Babb, 1996, pp. 12–30; Bell, 2009, pp. 78–82; Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 77–85).

This study draws upon seven fieldwork visits conducted between September 2022 and December 2025; the first, a *gṛha-praveśa* in Mysuru officiated by Nuthan A. Paṇḍita and team, was my first ethnographic encounter with Jain Brahmin priesthood and catalysed the research project, while visits 2–7 (March 2023–December 2025) comprised the structured fieldwork in Karnataka and adjoining regions. The primary focus of observation and interview was the dominant hereditary Jain Brahmin lineage, whose ritual training, temple responsibilities, and interactions with trustees and lay devotees form the core empirical basis of this research. Visits to western and coastal Karnataka included meetings with members of the *Indra* priestly community, allowing for comparative insight into intra-priestly differentiation. Earlier descriptive accounts of

temple practice (Diwakar 1968, pp. 578-600) provide useful historical context, but the analysis presented here is grounded primarily in contemporary observation.

Through participant observation of daily *pūjā*, *abhiṣeka*, and festival ceremonies — conducted across temples in Mysore, Cāmarājanagara, Kanakagiri, Udupi, and Śravaṇabelāgoḷa between 2023 and 2025 — as well as semi-structured interviews with priests and temple administrators, this study examines how ritual authority functions in present-day Jain institutional life. One particularly illustrative example was witnessed during fieldwork in Mysore: a Varṣa Vardhana ritual (the first birthday ceremony of the *ṣoḍaśa-karmas*) performed for a Jain Brahmin girl child. The ceremony revealed a striking gender equality both among participants and in the ceremonial attention accorded to the child. The anchor ritual of *Śānti-Homa* was performed with full liturgical

By shifting from structural explanation to lived practice, the analysis traces how hereditary custodians negotiate committee governance, reformist discourse and evolving lay expectations in modern temple frameworks.

### 1.5.1 Embodied Authority and Ritual Restriction

Daily *pūjā* in Digambara Jain temples follows a structured sequence including purification, *abhiṣeka*, anointing, offering, and recitation (Williams, 1963, pp. 216–234). ritual performance constitutes the primary arena in which hereditary authority is enacted.

Field observations conducted across Karnataka (2023–2025) show that priestly legitimacy is communicated through procedural precision and bodily discipline in the sanctum. Ritual gestures are deliberate and highly patterned. Knowledge of *mantra* pronunciation and material preparation is acquired through prolonged apprenticeship within hereditary households and demonstrated through fluency of execution not verbal assertion. This authority is embodied more than proclaimed.

Embodied discipline functions as a form of symbolic capital in the temple setting. Devotees recognize expertise through performance; hesitation or deviation may generate subtle doubt, while procedural smoothness reinforces confidence and legitimacy. The architecturally constrained and symbolically charged environment of the sanctum intensifies this dynamic, focusing attention on the priest's composure and control of sacred space.

In traditional Digambara temple contexts in Karnataka, daily *pūjā* in the sanctum (*garbhagrha*) is performed exclusively by hereditary Jain Brahmins. Access to the sanctum and physical contact with the image are restricted to trained priests (Cort 2001, pp. 61–65).<sup>24</sup> Devotees observe from outside the threshold, sponsor rituals, provide materials and receive consecrated substances such as *gandhodaka* or participate in *ārati* under priestly direction. The relationship is accordingly non-salvific but not egalitarian in terms of ritual access: the priest does not mediate liberation yet exercises custodial authority over sacred space and procedural correctness.

In domestic ritual settings such as *homas* or life-cycle rites (*śoḍaśa-saṃskāras*) lay participation becomes more collaborative, with priests guiding householders through recitation and offering (Cort 2001, pp. 164–168). By contrast, in major temple ceremonies including *pratiṣṭhā* and *mahāmastakābhiṣeka*, hereditary priests function as ritual directors, coordinating assistants and complex ritual sequences while maintaining control over sanctum-centred procedures.

Through these differentiated contexts, daily worship, domestic ritual, and large-scale ceremony authority is consistently demonstrated as disciplined custodianship grounded in lineage-based expertise — not metaphysical privilege.

### 1.5.2 Lineage, Pedagogy, and Authority as Service

Ethnographic interviews conducted during fieldwork (2023–2025) show that hereditary Jain Brahmins frequently articulate their authority through narratives of ancestral continuity. Priests recount genealogies linking their families to specific temples across multiple generations, situating contemporary ritual performance within a sustained historical trajectory. These narratives do not typically emphasize privilege; rather, they foreground custodianship, discipline, and inherited responsibility.

Transmission of ritual knowledge in priestly households reinforces this continuity. Training often begins informally in childhood, as younger members accompany elders into temple spaces, observe ritual preparation, and gradually assume minor responsibilities under supervision. Memorization of *mantras* and procedural sequences

---

<sup>24</sup> Interview with temple priest, Kanakagiri, March 2023. Similar formulations were recorded in interviews at Cāmarājanagara, Wayanad, Mysore (2023–2025). Full interview transcripts in Kannada transcribed into English and archived.

is cultivated through repetition, correction, and embodied participation in daily worship. Unlike institutional seminaries, this apprenticeship model embeds ritual competence in domestic and familial life. Ritual knowledge becomes inseparable from lineage identity (see Chapter 3 for detailed analysis of pedagogical structures and apprenticeship models).

Intergenerational engagement with manuscripts and inherited liturgical texts further materializes this transmission (see Figure 1.4). Textual consultation is not merely archival but pedagogical, linking oral instruction, written authority, and embodied performance. Through such practices, competence is tested and validated before independent responsibility is granted.



**FIGURE 1.4: RITUAL PERFORMANCE BY MEMBERS OF A HEREDITARY JAIN PRIESTLY LINEAGE, PUTHANANGADI, KERALA. AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH, MARCH 2023. THE INTERGENERATIONAL COLLABORATION VISIBLE IN THE SCENE EXEMPLIFIES THE LINEAGE-BASED TRANSMISSION OF RITUAL COMPETENCE CENTRAL TO THE THESIS.**

A recurring theme in priestly self-description is *sevā* (service). Priests frame their role as the maintenance of tradition for the benefit of the community, an ethos distinct from the exercise of inherited status. This discourse mitigates potential tension between hereditary office and Jain doctrinal egalitarianism. Classical Jain ethics valorize humility, discipline, and restraint (Williams 1963, pp. 29–46; Jaini 1979, pp. 27-30); by emphasizing service over superiority, hereditary priests align their institutional function with broader ethical ideals. With this sense of service, Jain Brahmins still perform mandatory daily offerings even for temples which have little to no patronage left, e.g. Ummathuru, Muguru, Harve, Kuderu, Malayuru are such examples (see Figure 1.5).



**FIGURE 1.5: UMMATHURU JAIN TEMPLE MAINTAINED BY LAKSHMIPATHI PANDIT WITH DAILY RITUAL OBSERVANCE DESPITE LIMITED PATRON ACTIVITY IN THE SURROUNDING VILLAGE. AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH, MARCH 2023.**

Lay perception reinforces this framing. Devotees frequently express preference for hereditary priests on pragmatic grounds: "they know the procedure correctly" or "their

family has always served this temple."<sup>25</sup> Legitimacy is thus tied to reliability, continuity, and demonstrable competence rather than metaphysical distinction. Institutional authority is socially reproduced through everyday trust as much as through genealogical inheritance.

Taken together, lineage memory, household pedagogy, service discourse, and lay recognition form an integrated mechanism of continuity. Hereditary authority persists not as an abstract claim of inherited privilege, but as a socially recognized system of disciplined transmission grounded in competence and custodianship.

A gendered dimension of this transmission deserves preliminary mention here and receives sustained analysis in later chapters. While temple officiation in the *garbhagrha* remains an exclusively male domain in the Digambara Karnataka context, the reproduction of priestly habitus — dietary discipline, ritual rhythm, liturgical vocabulary, and ethical comportment — unfolds substantially in domestic space, where women of priestly households carry the daily work of teaching children the observances, maintaining domestic shrines, and transmitting vernacular liturgical knowledge. Household pedagogy is not peripheral to hereditary priesthood but one of its structural conditions.

Alongside the lay women of priestly households, Digambara *āryikās* (female renunciants) sustain an interpretive authority distinct from the performative authority of male temple officiants. Through teaching, discourse, and moral counsel, *āryikās* shape the doctrinal understanding of both priests and lay congregations (Balbir, 1994, pp. 124–125). Later chapters develop this gendered distribution of authority in detail; for present purposes it is enough to register that hereditary priesthood in Karnataka operates within a wider economy of religious authority in which women — as household transmitters and as

---

<sup>25</sup> For detailed data on temple governance structures, committee composition, and administrative arrangements across the temples examined in this study, see Appendix 1. The data were collected and compiled by the researcher during fieldwork (2023–2025).

ascetic interpreters — are indispensable to the tradition's continuity, even where sanctum ritual remains male-reserved (Shāntā, 1997, pp. 630–636).

### 1.5.3 Committee Governance, Reform and Negotiated Authority

Modern Jain temple governance in Karnataka frequently operates through committees responsible for financial oversight, infrastructural development and regulatory compliance. Such committee-based administration reflects broader patterns of lay institutional authority within Jain religious organization (Dundas 2002, pp. 195-197; Cort 2001, pp. 113–117).<sup>26</sup> In the Karnataka context, historical studies of temple patronage and administration similarly document the central role of lay elites in structuring institutional authority (Singh 2008, pp. 145–152).

Within this framework, the interaction between hereditary priests and committee members provides a significant arena for observing negotiated authority. Hereditary priests retain control over liturgical sequence, sanctum access, and ritual correctness. That authority rests on lineage-based apprenticeship and mastery of procedural detail. Committees, by contrast, oversee remuneration structures, infrastructural investment, festival scheduling, and regulatory compliance. Field observations conducted across Karnataka (2023–2025) indicate that while these domains are differentiated, they remain structurally interdependent: ritual continuity depends upon priestly expertise, and institutional sustainability depends upon administrative organization.

Points of negotiation arise where administrative considerations intersect with ritual tradition. Discussions concerning the duration of ceremonies, scheduling adjustments to accommodate urban work rhythms, introduction of sound systems, or infrastructural modification illustrate how modernization pressures enter ritual space. Historical analyses of temple organization suggest that such negotiation between ritual specialists and lay patrons is not new but characteristic of Jain institutional life (Cort 2001, pp. 113–117; Dundas 2002, pp. 136-138). In contemporary contexts, these negotiations tend to be predominantly pragmatic in character.

---

<sup>26</sup> Observed during fieldwork and during the US visit of Nuthan A. Paṇḍita, when hosts gave time limits for the ritual due to scheduling constraints as well as participants and guests attention-span. Also, observed at Śravaṇabelāgoḷa during May 2025 field visit, lay persons participating in Nitya *Abhiṣeka*.

Reformist currents add a further dimension to this dynamic. Studies of modern Digambara identity formation in South Mahāraṣṭra and North Karnataka indicate ongoing processes of boundary negotiation and communal self-definition (Scholz, 2011b, pp. 176–187). In some urban settings, there are calls for abbreviated ritual formats, increased emphasis on scriptural study, or expanded lay participation.<sup>27</sup> Yet even reform-oriented communities continue to rely upon hereditary priests for technically complex rites such as *pratiṣṭhā*, major *abhiṣeka*, and calendrical observances. The procedural demands of consecration and icon maintenance require specialized training not easily transferable through informal instruction.

Adaptation occurs within limits. Ritual formats may be recalibrated and administrative structures modernized, but sanctum-centered authority remains anchored in lineage-based expertise. As with earlier historical phases of institutional consolidation, contemporary governance reflects negotiation rather than rupture. The durability of hereditary custodianship within committee-governed temple environments reinforces the central analytical claim of this study: structural differentiation persists even as its modalities evolve.

#### 1.5.4 Ritual Scale, Demonstrative Competence, and Continuity

Large-scale ceremonies such as *pratiṣṭhā* (image consecration) and *mahāmastakābhiṣeka* reveal the full scope of hereditary priestly authority. These multi-day events involve complex sequences of purification rites, *mantra* recitation, calendrical alignment, and coordinated ablutions. While detailed ritual analysis is presented in subsequent chapters, it is sufficient here to observe that such ceremonies demand sustained technical training and precise orchestration (Cort 2001, pp. 110–114; Jaini 1979, pp. 191–198).

In these contexts, hereditary priests function as ritual directors. They allocate roles to assistants, guide sponsors through prescribed sequences, determine auspicious timing, and ensure conformity with inherited liturgical procedure. It becomes demonstrative: it

---

<sup>27</sup> The *niścaya-vyavahāra* distinction, while rooted in Digambara epistemology (particularly the Pravacanasāra of Kundakunda), is deployed here not merely as a doctrinal category but as an analytical framework. It provides what anthropologists of religion might term an "indigenous hermeneutic": a locally generated interpretive lens that structures how practitioners themselves understand the gap between soteriological ideals and institutional realities. For the philosophical foundations of this two-standpoint model, see Kundakunda, Pravacanasāra 1.7–1.9; for its application in modern scholarship, see Johnson (1995, pp. 28–42).

is established through the seamless execution of intricate ritual choreography; declarative claims play little role.

Field observations (2023–2025) indicate that participants and observers frequently interpret the smooth conduct of multi-day ceremonies as evidence of lineage competence. Ritual complexity reinforces community acknowledgement of hereditary expertise and reflects the accumulated procedural knowledge embedded in priestly households.

At the same time, contemporary hereditary Jain Brahmins operate within evolving social conditions shaped by educational mobility, economic diversification and diasporic connections. Ritual formats may be adjusted in duration or logistical organization, yet the structural reliance upon trained custodians remains intact. Continuity and transformation thus coexist (see Figure 1.6). Institutional differentiation persists within doctrinal constraints, grounded in competence, repetition, and communal recognition rather than metaphysical privilege (Dundas 2002, pp. 273-275).



**FIGURE 1.6: MULTIPLE GENERATIONS OF JAIN BRAHMINS DISCUSSING A HEREDITARY RITUAL MANUSCRIPT. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR, MARCH 2023. THE SCENE EXEMPLIFIES THE PERSISTENCE OF LINEAGE-BASED KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION DESCRIBED IN §1.3.5.**

## 1.6 Historiographical Integration, Theoretical Consolidation, and Final Articulation of the Research Problem

Preceding sections have established the doctrinal parameters, regional historical foundations, sociological structures, and contemporary manifestations of the hereditary Jain Brahmin priesthood in Karnataka. To complete the analytical arc of this chapter and bring it to full doctoral depth, it is necessary to situate the present study explicitly in existing scholarship, consolidate its theoretical commitments, refine the research problem in its mature form, and clarify the methodological architecture that structures the dissertation as a whole.

### 1.6.1 Situating the Study Within Jain Studies Scholarship

Modern Jain studies have developed along several disciplinary trajectories: philological analysis of canonical texts, philosophical exposition of metaphysics and *karma* theory, regional historical reconstruction, and anthropological examination of lived religious practice. Each of these strands contributes essential insights into the problem of authority in Jainism. Yet hereditary temple priesthood in Karnataka has not been treated as a sustained analytical focus.

Padmanabh Jaini's *The Jaina Path of Purification* (1979) remains foundational for understanding the soteriological architecture of Jainism. Jaini establishes that liberation is achieved through disciplined eradication of karmic matter and that spiritual authority rests upon epistemic clarity and ethical restraint without recourse to ritual mediation (Jaini, 1979, pp. 112-135). His work demonstrates the non-theistic character of Jain metaphysics and the absence of salvific intercession by priests. The present study builds upon this doctrinal clarity to examine how institutional differentiation develops without altering the underlying soteriological structure.

Paul Dundas's *The Jains* (2002) provides a comprehensive historical synthesis of Jain development across regions and sects. His treatment of sectarian differentiation and the *Bhaṭṭāraka* institution offers crucial context for understanding institutional consolidation in South India (Dundas, 2002, pp. 123-125). While Dundas acknowledges the presence of temple priests, hereditary priesthood is not examined as a conceptual problem requiring integrated doctrinal and sociological analysis. This dissertation extends his regional framework by centering hereditary ritual custodianship as its primary object of inquiry.

John Cort's scholarship on Jain image worship and devotional framing (2001, 2011) decisively challenged earlier assumptions that temple ritual represented a deviation from ascetic ideals. Cort shows that image veneration and ritual practice are integral to Jain religious life and are narratively framed in Jain cosmology. His focus, however, lies primarily on iconography, narrative framing, and lay devotional identity; the social formation of ritual specialists lies outside his scope. By shifting attention to hereditary custodians, the present study complements and extends this line of inquiry.

James Laidlaw's *Riches and Renunciation* (1995) offers a detailed anthropological account of ethical negotiation among Jain laypersons, particularly in relation to wealth and ascetic ideals (Laidlaw, 1995, pp. 165–174). His emphasis on moral reasoning and lived practice informs the methodological orientation of this dissertation. Yet priesthood remains peripheral to his analysis. By foregrounding hereditary ritual authority, the present study broadens the anthropological conversation about authority in Jain communities.

Sociological surveys of Jain community structure (Sangave, 1980, pp. 97–108; Shah 2004, pp. 22-56) document patterns of endogamy and occupational clustering, showing that Jain communities participate in caste-like forms of social organization despite doctrinal egalitarianism. However, hereditary ritual specialists are not analyzed as a distinct institutional formation requiring systematic integration with doctrinal analysis.

Taken together, Jain studies provide substantial resources for understanding doctrine, ritual, and community. What remains underexplored is the sustained investigation of hereditary Jain Brahmins in Karnataka through an integrated framework combining textual exegesis, regional history, sociological theory, and ethnographic observation. This dissertation addresses that lacuna.

### 1.6.2 Theoretical Consolidation: Integrating Indigenous and Sociological Categories

Analytical framework of this study integrates internal Jain philosophical categories with sociological theory to examine hereditary priesthood without reducing it to either doctrinal anomaly or purely social artifact.

First, the *nīścaya-vyavahāra* distinction provides the indigenous conceptual foundation<sup>28</sup>. From the ultimate standpoint (*nīścaya-naya*), all souls are inherently equal, pure, and capable of liberation. From the conventional standpoint (*vyavahāra-naya*), structured roles facilitate communal organization and devotional life. On the reading advanced here, hereditary priesthood figures as a conventional differentiation that does not compromise metaphysical equality. Such framing allows institutional hierarchy to coexist with ontological egalitarianism.

Second, Weber's theory of authority clarifies the transition from ascetic exemplarity to routinized institutional structure (Weber 1978, pp. 241–254). Early Jainism foregrounded ascetic discipline as the locus of spiritual authority. As temple-centered devotional practice expanded, routinized mechanisms emerged to stabilize ritual life. Hereditary priests operate within this routinized domain, sustaining procedural continuity; charismatic revelation plays no comparable role.

Third, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital illuminates how genealogical continuity, ritual competence, and historical association with specific temples generate legitimacy (Bourdieu 1991, pp. 116–120). Symbolic capital accrues through repeated performance and communal recognition rather than doctrinal proclamation. In this context, ritual authority derives from disciplined expertise and accumulated trust.

Fourth, caste theory is employed cautiously. Dumont's model of hierarchy grounded in ritual purity (1980, pp. 65–68) cannot be directly mapped onto Jain metaphysics, which rejects intrinsic spiritual inequality. Nevertheless, social stratification persists as a sociological reality. Dirks's analysis of colonial codification demonstrates how administrative processes can solidify customary roles into legally recognized entitlements (Dirks 2001, pp. 43–50), thereby reinforcing hereditary structures without theological justification.

---

<sup>28</sup> The comparative study of non-Brahmanical priestly traditions remains underdeveloped in South Asian scholarship. Fuller (1984, pp. 49–73) provides a foundational account of Brahmanical priestly authority, but comparable frameworks for Jain ritual specialists are largely absent. Cort (2001) and Babb (1996) address Jain lay practice, yet the hereditary priestly lineages that mediate between laity and monastic establishments receive sustained attention in neither work. This lacuna motivates the present comparative exercise.

By integrating these frameworks, the study analyzes hereditary Jain Brahmins as historically situated actors operating across layered domains doctrinal, institutional, social, and administrative while maintaining analytical distinction between ontological equality and social differentiation.

### 1.6.3 Final Articulation of the Research Problem

This study is guided by the following central question:

**How did hereditary Jain Brahmin priesthood in Karnataka emerge, consolidate, and persist within a religious tradition that doctrinally affirms the ontological equality of all souls and rejects birth-based salvific privilege?**

This overarching question unfolds into several interrelated dimensions:

1. **Doctrinal Dimension:**

How do canonical and philosophical texts construct authority and eligibility? In what ways does the *niścaya-vyavahāra* distinction provide conceptual space for functional distinction without compromising metaphysical equality?

2. **Historical Dimension:**

Through what processes royal patronage, temple endowments, *bhaṭṭāraka* mediation, devotional routinization, and colonial codification did ritual specialization become genealogically stabilized in Karnataka?

3. **Sociological Dimension:**

How do hereditary Jain Brahmins negotiate authority in contemporary temple governance structures shaped by committee administration, educational mobility and economic diversification?

4. **Terminological Dimension:**

How should the category "Jain Brahmin" be analytically defined in Karnataka, particularly in relation to *Indras* and *Upādhyāyas*, while preserving regional specificity and avoiding categorical conflation?

Rather than positing contradiction, this dissertation traces how institutional adaptation operates within doctrinal constraints (§1.4), reframing hereditary priesthood not as theological deviation but as historically situated differentiation within the *vyavahāra* sphere.

In addressing these questions, this dissertation makes several contributions to scholarship that existing work on Jainism has not provided. First, it offers the first systematic examination of the Jain Brahmin community as a distinct ritual-intellectual formation within the Digambara tradition. While the existence of Jain Brahmins has been noted in passing by Sangave (2001), Dundas (2002), and others, no study has undertaken a sustained analysis of their pedagogical structures, ritual repertoire, institutional roles, and contemporary adaptations. By clarifying the distinction between Jain Brahmin identity as a lineage category and the office of *purohita* as a functional role, this study introduces conceptual precision into discussions that have often conflated the two.

Second, the detailed ethnographic documentation of ritual practice — including temple liturgy and the *ṣoḍaśa karmas* — constitutes an act of scholarly preservation. These procedures, transmitted through vernacular Kannada manuals and oral instruction, have remained largely inaccessible to international audiences. Presenting them in English bridges the linguistic gap between community knowledge and global scholarship. Third, and more broadly, the study demonstrates how the *niścaya-vyavahāra* distinction — typically treated as an abstract epistemological doctrine — functions in practice as an institutional mechanism: it provides the conceptual space within which hereditary differentiation operates without metaphysical rupture. This redeployment of an indigenous Jain category as an analytical tool for understanding institutional adaptation is, to my knowledge, novel in the secondary literature. The full implications of these contributions are assessed in Chapter VII (§7.3).

Taken together, these contributions address gaps across three intersecting fields. Within Jain studies, the dissertation provides the first monograph-length treatment of hereditary priesthood as a distinct institutional formation, moving beyond the passing references that have characterized the topic since Sangave's foundational survey. Within South Asian religious studies more broadly, it offers a detailed case of how an egalitarian soteriological tradition generates and sustains hereditary institutional roles — a dynamic that complicates standard models of caste-ritual correspondence derived primarily from Brahmanical materials. Within the sociology of religion, the study demonstrates how indigenous conceptual frameworks (here, the *niścaya-vyavahāra* distinction) can serve as analytical tools for understanding institutional adaptation, rather than requiring the imposition of external theoretical categories.

#### 1.6.4 Methodological Architecture

This dissertation employs an integrated methodological approach combining textual analysis, historical reconstruction, and ethnographic fieldwork to address the doctrinal, historical, and sociological dimensions of hereditary priesthood.

**Textual Analysis.** Close reading of canonical and philosophical sources clarifies how authority and eligibility are constructed in Jain doctrine. Particular attention is given to distinctions between prescriptive ideals and their interpretive development in later scholastic traditions.

**Historical Reconstruction.** Epigraphic records, regional histories and colonial administrative materials are examined to trace the consolidation of temple networks and the gradual stabilization of ritual roles in specific lineages in Karnataka.

**Ethnographic Fieldwork.** Field research was conducted across multiple visits to Karnataka and Kerala between 2023 and 2025. Principal fieldwork sites included Śravaṇabeḷagoḷa, Moodabidri, Kanakagiri, Cāmarājanagara, and Mysuru in Karnataka, with additional visits to hereditary priestly households in the Wayanad region of Kerala and temple complexes in Udipi and Dakshina Kannada (see Figure 1.7). An extended fieldwork period of four weeks in Mysuru enabled intensive documentation of the main ritual practices, including the sixteen *saṃskāras*. Libraries at Śravaṇabeḷagoḷa, the Jain Brahmin Hostel, and the University of Mysore were consulted for manuscript and archival material.

**Participants and Data Collection.** The study draws on three complementary data sources. First, a structured survey questionnaire was distributed in printed Kannada to approximately three hundred Jain Brahmin families identified through a community directory maintained by a local contact who facilitated recruitment through email, WhatsApp, and announcements at community gatherings during April–June 2025. Approximately fifty per cent of the surveyed families returned completed questionnaires. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with approximately thirty informants, including practising hereditary priests across multiple generational cohorts, non-practising members of priestly families, temple committee representatives, and senior lay patrons. The interview guide comprised twenty-two open-ended questions covering demographic background, priestly training and practice, ritual texts and manuscripts, temple governance and funding, intergenerational transmission, and the

perceived future of the profession. Additional informants were identified through snowball sampling and through recommendations from the doctoral guidance committee. Third, approximately twenty-five ritual events were directly observed or participated in, including daily *pūjā*, festival ceremonies, lifecycle rites, and the *ṣoḍaśa-saṃskāras*, providing first-hand documentation of liturgical practice and embodied authority.

**Language Protocol.** Interviews and survey instruments were administered in the language preferred by each informant. Because the researcher does not speak Kannada, two research assistants with native Kannada proficiency were recruited to facilitate interviews at Karnataka sites, to administer the printed questionnaire, and to translate field notes and recorded material into English. From 2025 onward, AI-assisted transcription and translation tools were additionally employed to process audio recordings and to render Kannada-language manuscript pages into English; all machine-generated output was subsequently verified against the original by the research assistants<sup>29</sup>. Where technical liturgical vocabulary appears in the dissertation, the original Sanskrit or *Prākṛit* term is retained alongside its English gloss. Audio recording was used where informants granted explicit consent; in other cases, contemporaneous handwritten notes were taken and expanded into full transcripts on the same day.

**Ethics and Consent.** The study was submitted for ethical review to the Ethics Committee on Scientific Research of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Ghent University, chaired by Prof. dr. Veerle Provoost. The application was filed on 7 March 2025 and revised on 30 June 2025 following the committee's advice letter. All primary respondents provided written informed consent using a bilingual form (English and Kannada) that was also discussed and clarified verbally before each interview. Participation was voluntary and uncompensated; respondents could withdraw their data within five days of the interview without providing a reason. Audio and video recording occurred only with explicit permission. Non-public figures are anonymized in all publications and presentations;

---

<sup>29</sup> The concept of institutional trust operative here resonates with what Luhmann (1979, pp. 39–43) terms "system trust" (Systemvertrauen): confidence directed not at specific individuals but at the reliability of an entire institutional arrangement. In hereditary priestly lineages, such trust is grounded in the assumption that procedural knowledge has been transmitted intact across generations — an assumption that lineage continuity itself is taken to warrant.

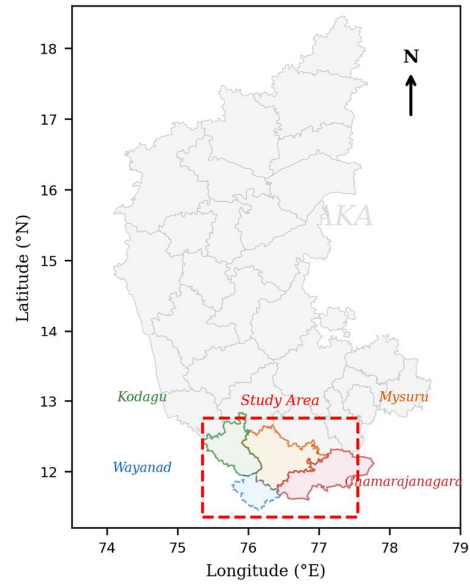
where minor children were present during ritual observations, their identities are not disclosed and their faces are obscured in any published photographs.

**Data Management.** A Data Management Plan was created using DMPonline.be and submitted via the Oasis system in June 2023. Field data—including interview transcripts, survey responses, photographic and audio-visual documentation, and manuscript scans—are stored on password-protected institutional servers at Ghent University. Personal data are pseudonymized, and explicit participant consent is obtained before sharing any images, video, or audio material.

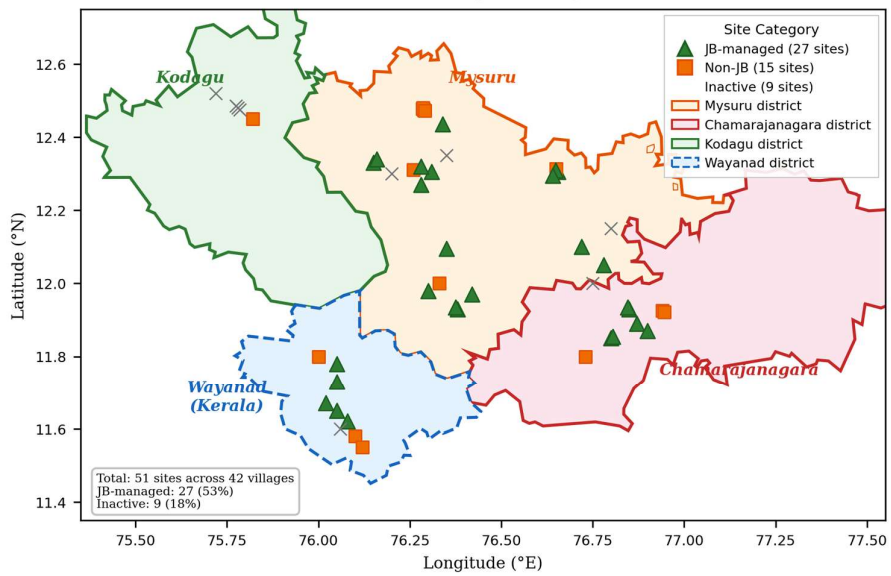
**Researcher Positionality.** I am Jain but do not belong to the Jain Brahmin priestly community. This positioning conferred a degree of shared cultural and religious familiarity—facilitating initial trust, access to ritual settings, and recognition of doctrinal terminology—while maintaining a structural distance from the specific lineage-based practices and internal hierarchies under investigation. Informants generally regarded me as a sympathetic but external observer, sufficiently knowledgeable to understand the significance of priestly roles yet not embedded in the competitive or affective dynamics of particular priestly households. Beyond observer participation, I have myself undergone several of the rites analysed in Chapter V—including *nāmakaraṇa*, *caula*, *upanayana*, *samāvartana*, and *vivāha*—and have on subsequent occasions hosted the *navagraha śānti-homa* in my own household. The account that follows therefore proceeds in part from the reflexive memory of having stood on both sides of the ritual fire: as initiate, as householder, and as an inherited bearer of a ritual vocabulary whose transmission is itself one of the animating questions of this thesis. I acknowledge this auto-ethnographic vantage not as a claim to privileged access but as a methodological accountability (see also §5.6). To guard against the risk that shared Jain identity might produce uncritical acceptance of informant accounts, several reflexive measures were adopted: a field journal was maintained throughout the research period in which interpretive assumptions were regularly recorded and interrogated; findings were triangulated against epigraphic, archival, and manuscript evidence wherever possible; and the doctoral guidance committee—comprising Prof. dr. Tine Vekemans, Prof. dr. Eva De Clercq, and Prof. dr. Robert Zydenbos—provided ongoing review of analytical interpretations, helping to identify potential blind spots arising from cultural proximity.

**Synthesis.** By integrating these methods, the study avoids reducing hereditary priesthood either to doctrinal inconsistency or to purely sociological contingency. Instead, hereditary Jain Brahmins are analyzed as actors situated at the intersection of metaphysical ideals and institutional necessity, where textual norms, historical processes, and lived practice converge.

**(a) Survey Focus Area in Southern Karnataka & Wayanad**



**(b) Detail: Survey Sites by District**



Source: Field survey, Sanjay Jain (2023-2025). Boundaries: GADM.

**FIGURE 1.7: MAP OF PRINCIPAL FIELDWORK SITES IN KARNATAKA AND KERALA (ŚRAVAṆABEḶAGOḶA, MOODABIDRI, KANAKAGIRI, CĀMARĀJANAGARA, MYSURU, WAYANAD), CORRESPONDING TO THE SITES REFERENCED THROUGHOUT THE DISSERTATION. BASEMAP: PUBLIC-DOMAIN OPENSTREETMAP; ANNOTATION BY THE AUTHOR, 2026.**

## 1.7 Authority, Institutionalization, and Comparative Reflection

### 1.7.1 Distinguishing Jain Brahmin Priesthood from Brahmanical Priesthood

The designation "Jain Brahmin" inevitably invites comparison with Brahmanical priesthood. Such comparison must be undertaken with analytical precision<sup>30</sup>, avoiding both polemical contrast and superficial equivalence.

In Brahmanical traditions, priesthood has historically been associated with Vedic ritual expertise and the hereditary transmission of sacrificial knowledge. Ritual performance operates within a cosmological framework in which offerings sustain or align cosmic order, and priests function as authorized specialists within that sacrificial system (Gonda 1980, pp. 1–18; Dumont 1980, pp. 67–72). In this tradition, authority is tied to mastery of Vedic recitation, ritual procedure, and lineage-based transmission of sacred learning.

Jain metaphysics, by contrast, denies the existence of a creator deity and rejects sacrificial cosmology (Jaini 1979, pp. 3-12; Dundas 2002, pp. 110-111). Ritual acts directed toward *Tīrthaṅkaras* are commemorative and devotional in character, without propitiatory intent. The liberated *jina* neither intervenes in worldly affairs nor dispenses grace. Consequently, the Jain ritual specialist does not function as a mediator between devotee and deity in a salvific sense.

As previewed in §1.1, the designation "Jain Brahmin" functions as a social translation, not a doctrinal equivalence. Its analytical force lies in signalling hereditary ritual expertise and custodianship within a Hindu-majority cultural environment while the underlying metaphysical framework continues to reject intrinsic spiritual hierarchy based on birth.

Essential to this analysis, these priests do not claim exclusive access to revelation nor inherent spiritual superiority. The authority they exercise is procedural and custodial in character rather than sacrificial. The term "Brahmin" in this context reflects historical and social adaptation; it does not indicate theological convergence.

---

<sup>30</sup> While this chapter proceeds primarily through textual and doctrinal analysis, the fieldwork data informing this study (162 completed household questionnaires enumerating 535 household members across 51 Digambara temple-affiliated households, 2023–2025) are drawn upon where relevant and analysed in full in Chapter 6. The ritual and institutional dimensions described here correspond directly to practices observed in the field; for instance, the sixteen-ritual (*śoḍaśā*) framework described in §2.8 is actively practised by Jain Brahmin priests documented in the survey.

### 1.7.2 Institutional Authority, Trust, and Scholarly Implications

**Institutionalization.** All religious traditions confront the problem of continuity. Charismatic founders and ascetic exemplars cannot indefinitely sustain expanding communities without organizational structures. Jainism, with its strong renunciatory orientation, faced a persistent tension between itinerant asceticism and stable temple institutions (Dundas 2002, pp. 123-125, 136-138).

Institutionalization involves routinization, codification, and role differentiation (Weber 1978, pp. 241–254). The increasing reliance upon ritual manuals and standardized liturgical procedures in medieval Jainism reflects broader processes of procedural stabilization. In Karnataka, the expansion of temple networks required predictable ritual execution across generations. Hereditary custodianship provided such continuity without altering core soteriological commitments.

By the same token, this distinction provided conceptual space to distinguish ultimate spiritual truth from conventional institutional arrangements. Hereditary priesthood thus emerges as a conventional adaptation ensuring ritual stability without redefining metaphysical principles.

**Trust and Hereditary Transmission.** Religious institutions depend upon trust: confidence that ritual procedures are performed correctly, calendrical observances align with tradition, and consecrations adhere to inherited norms. Such trust is reinforced through visible continuity<sup>31</sup>.

Hereditary transmission links present practice with ancestral service. Lineage memory functions as institutional assurance, embodying accumulated procedural knowledge. Within caste-structured social environments, patterns of endogamy and occupational continuity further reinforce expectations of lineage-based expertise (Sangave 1980, pp. 108-111).

---

<sup>31</sup> The term *niścaya* (Skt.) denotes the absolute or ultimate perspective (*niścaya-naya*) in Digambara Jain epistemology, referring to reality as apprehended from the standpoint of the liberated soul, free from all conventional distinctions.

Trust in this context rests not upon metaphysical authority but upon demonstrated competence and reputational stability. Hereditary office becomes one mechanism through which such confidence is sustained.

**Authority Without Salvific Monopoly.** A defining feature of Jain hereditary priesthood is the absence of salvific monopoly. Liberation remains accessible to all through right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct (Jaini 1979, pp. 27-32). Ritual performance may support devotion and communal cohesion, but it does not confer exclusive spiritual privilege.

Circumscribed authority of this kind distinguishes Jain priesthood from traditions in which clergy mediate divine grace or sacramental efficacy. Authority remains functional and embedded within the conventional sphere not in claims of spiritual supremacy.

**Implications for Ascetic Traditions.** The case of hereditary Jain Brahmins challenges the assumption that renunciatory traditions necessarily resist institutional stratification. It shows that functional specialization can develop within ascetic frameworks through conventional adaptation.

Ascetic ideals may define ultimate spiritual aspiration, while institutional roles address communal maintenance. The Jain example illustrates how layered ontologies permit differentiation without metaphysical rupture.

These four dimensions — institutionalization, trust, non-salvific authority, and conventional adaptation within an ascetic tradition — together distinguish the Jain Brahmin case from familiar models of hereditary priesthood in South Asian religions. Where Brahmanical priesthood derives legitimacy from Vedic revelation and ritual cosmology, and Buddhist monastic authority depends upon ordination lineage and vinaya discipline, Jain hereditary custodianship rests upon a combination of procedural competence, communal recognition, and the doctrinal distinction between ultimate and conventional spheres. This configuration has no exact parallel in existing comparative literature on South Asian religious specialists.

Comparative implications extend beyond taxonomy. The Jain Brahmin case suggests that traditions premised on radical spiritual egalitarianism may generate distinctive forms of institutional authority precisely because conventional roles must be explicitly justified rather than cosmologically assumed. The burden of justification — demonstrated

through the persistent invocation of the *niścaya-vyavahāra* framework across centuries of inscriptional and textual evidence examined in this study — constitutes a form of reflexive institutionalization that merits sustained attention in the sociology of religion. The chapters that follow trace these dynamics through textual analysis (Chapter 2), historical reconstruction (Chapters 3–4), and ethnographic documentation (Chapters 5–7).

## 1.8 Summary

In sum, the doctrinal, historical, and sociological foundations of the study. Jain canonical and philosophical sources locate spiritual authority in ethical discipline and right knowledge, displacing inherited hierarchy while leaving conceptual room for functional specialization within the conventional (*vyavahāra*) domain. The *niścaya-vyavahāra* distinction, the *karma-guṇasthāna-adhikāra* framework, and the complementarity of ascetic and lay life together permit differentiated religious roles without compromising the ontological equality of souls.

Historically, the consolidation of Digambara Jainism in Karnataka through dynastic patronage, monumental temple institutions, *bhaṭṭāraka* mediation, and early-modern codification created structural conditions in which hereditary ritual custodianship could stabilize. Within caste-structured society, occupational specialization gradually assumed intergenerational form, while doctrinal commitments restrained any metaphysical reading of such continuity.

Contemporary Jain Brahmin priests in Karnataka operate within negotiated institutional frameworks shaped by committee governance, reform movements, and occupational diversification. This authority rests on ritual competence, procedural continuity, and community acknowledgement — not in claims of birth-based salvific privilege. On this account, hereditary priesthood is best understood as a historically specific institutional adaptation rather than a theological deviation.

The chapter has defined the analytical problem, introduced the conceptual framework, and situated the study within existing scholarship. The remaining chapters develop this foundation systematically. Chapter II examines the concept of Brahminhood in Digambara doctrinal and narrative literature, tracing how textual sources negotiate the

category of the Jain Brahmin. Chapter III reconstructs the training structures and knowledge transmission practices through which priestly competence is cultivated and sustained across generations. Chapter IV provides a detailed ethnographic account of ritual practices, documenting the liturgical repertoire, procedural knowledge, and performative authority of contemporary Jain Brahmin priests. Chapter V examines the *ṣoḍaśa-karma*, the sixteen life-cycle rites that constitute a core dimension of priestly service in Digambara households. Chapter VI addresses the current state of affairs of the Jain Brahmin community, including occupational diversification, migration, institutional transformation, and the pressures reshaping priestly authority in the present. Chapter VII synthesizes the findings and assesses their implications for understanding religious authority, hereditary office, and institutional adaptation in ascetic traditions.