

ABSTRACT

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Tracing Gujaratiness in Modern Jainism through Early Modern and Modern Gujarati Narrative Retellings of Nemi and Rajul

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In western India, the links between Jain identity and Gujaratiness seem to be forged at the intersection between the “Gujarati” Jina, Neminath, and the Gujarati devotional literature that tells his story. The rich narrative tradition surrounding the Nemi and Rajul story flourishes in early modern Gujarati phagu and barahmasa poetry. The Gujarati phagu form develops in the context of the Nemi and Rajul story beginning in the fourteenth century. The phagu and barahmasa poems with their romantic imagination focus the attention to the particular details of Nemi and Rajul’s love for each other. This model sets up the pattern that is followed by dozens of twelve-month poems dedicated to this Jain love story. It is clear that it is this romantic literature--and not the renunciation model narratives of Neminath--that fuel the writing of the Jain layman Devcand’s beloved and widely-known 19th

century (Samvat 1900/ 1843-1844 CE) Gujarati Jain telling of Nemi and Rajul: the Nemanathano Saloko. This text is recited annually (called Nemi Vacan) at Svetambar Jain temples with great joy and also is recited by some families on the eve of weddings. This version of the story sets to story in a thoroughly imagined domestic context of a Gujarati household. Devchand identifies himself with the Visasrimali subcaste shared by most of the Jains in the community in which I worked--the very lay Jains who recite his narrative with such pleasure. The shared caste identity between Devchand and those who dominate the communities I work with increases the connection between the Gujarati telling of the Nemi story and Jain identity. The combined impact of the language, imagery and the identification with the author stake a claim for Gujaratiness—both language and culture—as the pinnacle of Jain life and this claim takes root because the soil was prepared by the attention given to this narrative by early modern Gujarati authors.