

FINEARTS IN JAIN CAVES AND TEMPLES OF TAMILNADU

Jainism flourished in Tamilnadu till the onset of ‘Bhakti cult’, which gave way to the rise of Saivism and fall of Jainism in the later years. During the period, the Jains’ contribution to the Tamil literature, arts and architecture is quite vast and noteworthy.

This paper brings out the glimpses of paintings in the Jain caves and temples of Tamilnadu.

The following are the Jain caves with the famous paintings:

1. Sitthannavaasal caves
2. Thirumalai caves

The following are the Jain temples where the fine paintings are found:

1. Trailokiyathar temple at Thiruparuthikkundram, Kancheepuram.
2. Simmapurathar temple at Mel Sithamur near Gingee.
3. Perumandur village near Tindivanam
4. Kundunathar temple at Karandai village near Kancheepuram.
5. Adhinathar temple at Veedur near Villupuram

Unfortunately, the paintings at the Jain temple at Perumandur village are completely lost. They depicted the series of events in that area, where Acharya Virasena played a vital role in reconverting those people who were forced to adhere to other religions back to Jainism, during a period of social and political pressures. These have been documented in McKenzie manuscripts and these details are still available today.

Though there are paintings available in the rest four Jain temples, the paintings at Trailokiya temple at Thiruparutthikkundram temple at Kanchipuram is discussed in detail in this paper.

Sitthannavaasal Jain cave:

Sitthannavaasal caves are situated in Pudukottai district at a distance of 58 km from Trichy. There are sculptures of Jain Tirthankaras in the caves and stone beds of the Jain ascetics are also seen at the side of the hillock. The word ‘Sitthannavaasal’ means ‘the abode of the Siddhas’.

There are two views with regard to the time period of these paintings. One view is that the paintings are said to be belonging to the period of

Mahendra Varma Pallavan of 7th century A.D. Another view is that it belonged to the period of Shri Vallabha of the Early Pandiyas of the 9th century A.D. Majority of the historians opine that they should have belonged to the Pallava period.

The frescoes of the Sitthannavaasal caves have been painted with the natural vegetable and mineral dyes. The sketches of these paintings are similar to those of the Ajantha caves near Aurangabad in Maharashtra (2nd century B.C. - 6th century A.D.) , the Sigriya (Srigiri) caves near Pollanurwa in Sri Lanka (5th century A.D.) and the Bagh paintings near Ramtek in Madhya Pradesh (5th - 6th century A.D.).

The method of the Ajantha paintings is of the 'tempora' style, i.e., the walls are covered with a plaster of lime and then the paint is applied on the dry surface, whereas at Sitthannavaasal, the paintings were applied on the wet surface of the lime plaster. The Ajantha and the Sigirya paintings depict mostly the Buddhist themes whereas only the Jain themes are depicted here. The technique of painting used here is known

as 'Fresco secco' meaning painting in a medium of lime while that used in Ajanta is 'tempora' technique.

The paintings are almost in dilapidated state, due to ill maintenance, rough weathering and indifferent and careless attitude of the public.

The walls, ceilings, cornices, beams and pillars of the cave temple are covered with the paintings. There is a design with a green carpet with striped borders on all sides and is decorated with irregular circles and interlinked squares. There are lotus flowers found within the squares and crosses inside these irregular circles. There are two human figures on either side above the horizontal arm and two lions on either side below the arm of each cross.

Different patterns are found in the carpet canopies painted on the ceiling in the 'ardha mantapa'. There is a painted scene of a lotus pool with green leaves, dark stalks and flowers of the lotuses and water lilies in different stages of budding and blossoming are depicted. Amidst them some fish, geese, cranes, a makhara, three bulls, buffaloes, three elephants and three men each holding a lotus in his hand are seen. Two

men are seen near the north west corner of the lotus tank wearing only the loin clothes, with their ears lobed and hair parted in the middle and cut close. One of them is plucking the lotus flowers with his right hand with a flower basket slung on the other. His companion is holding a lotus in one hand while the other is bent at the elbow, with the fingers set in a 'mriga mudra', deer gesture. The third one near the south west corner is seen carrying a bunch of lotus flowers with their stalks over his left shoulder and a long stalked water lily in his right hand.

There is a depiction of an 'apsara', a celestial dancer on the southern pillar, with her left arm stretched out gracefully and her right palm held in 'abhaya' pose with bent arm. She is adorned with her 'patra kundalas' in her ear lobes, bracelets and bangles in her hands. There is yet another celestial dancer depicted in the upper part of the northern pillar with her hair parted in the middle, and tied up into a knot at the back with her neck adorned with fine jewelry. Her ears are adorned with rings studded with gems and her arms with wristlets and armlets. Her left arm is in 'gaja hastha' gesture, suggesting a depiction of an elephant

and her right arm is bent at the elbow with the palm in 'abhaya hastha' gesture. These paintings recall the beauty, grace in their pose and expression of the 'apsaras' in mythology.

There are portraits of a king and his queen on the northern pillar, which are identified as Mahendra Varman and his queen. The king had been depicted with an elaborate 'kirita', crown on his head and 'patrakundala' in one ear lobe and 'makara kundala' in the other. His queen is seen behind him, with her hair tied up in a sort of a top knot. There is a human figure too faded to be identified in front of the royal couple.

The cornice in front of the mantapa is decorated with a carpet design with conventional lotuses. There is a depiction of a mythical swan on the surface of the cornice in front of the two pillars.

The Sitthannavaasal paintings are thus identified to be the mark of the Tamil Jain art with the tradition influenced by the Ajantha and Sigiriya paintings. It may also be said that these paintings are the only early evidence of Jain paintings in Tamilnadu.

Thirumalai caves:

Thirumalai means ‘the holy mountain’; it was also later referred to as ‘Arhantagiri’, meaning ‘the mountain of the Arhats’; in Tamil as ‘Engunavirai’ meaning ‘the mountain of those of eight attributes’.

It comprises of a temple and cave complex dating back to 9th century A.D. It is located at a place north west of Polur near Arni, in Thiruvannamalai district of Tamilnadu. This complex consists of 3 Jain caves, 2 Jain temples and a sculpture of Neminath Tirthankarar of 16m height, the tallest in Tamilnadu.

The Kunthavai Jinalaya temple belongs to 10th century A.D., said to have been built by Kunthavai, a Chola Princess. In the 16th century, a second temple for Mahaveera Tirthankarar was built to the west of the Kunthavai Jinalaya.

The large cavern at the base of the hill is known to have been built around 9th century A.D. In the 10th century A.D., it was divided into 30 separate chambers, to accommodate the Jain sculptures of Tirthankaras and a yakshi.

The paintings are supposed to have been added to this during a period between the 15th and 17th centuries. Most of the paintings have been lost due to weathering and lack of proper care and maintenance. Only a very few survive. The walls were painted with floral designs and there is a depiction of 'Samavasaranam', the divine pavilion. There is a dilapidated painting of nude Jain ascetics. The paintings were done using vegetable dyes.

Trailokiya nathar temple at Thiruparuthikkundram at

Kancheepuram:

Kancheepuram had been the seat of learning and point of confluence of various religious thoughts and faiths. It had been adored as 'Nakareshu Kanchi', meaning 'the best of the cities' by Mahakavi Kalidasa.

The south west part of Kanchipuram is the 'Jina Kanchi', the seat of one of the four primary Jain Mutts namely, Delhi, Kolhapur, Penukonda and Jina Kanchi. Thirupparutthikkundram is known to be the 'Jina Kanchi' as per the stone inscriptions of the 13th century AD,

available here at the ‘ardha mantapa’ of Shri Vardhamana Mahaveera temple. This place is of religious importance for Jains from 6th century A.D. onwards. The temple for Shri Vardhamana Mahaveera Tirthankara was built by the Pallava king Simma Varman during 6th century A.D. There are two temples here, one for Shri Vardhamana Mahaveera Tirthankara, and the other for Shri Chandra Prabha Tirthankara. There are three separate shrines for Padma Prabha Tirthankara, Vasupujya Tirthankara, and Parswanatha Tirthankara adjacent to the main temple. This group of shrines is referred to as ‘Triakuta basadi’ and had been built during the 12th century A.D. and was revamped during the end of the century, i.e., the 22nd year of rule of the Third Kulotthunga Chozhan.

There is a ‘maha mantapa’ of 61 feet length built in front of the ‘mukha mantapams’ of Trailokiyanathar temple and Triakuta basadi. This is called ‘sangeetha mantapam’ as music concerts had been performed here during the festivals. This has been built by Irugappa, a minister of Second Bukka, the descendant of Harihara and Bukka

of the Vijayanagar dynasty as per a stone inscription. It is also known that the Irugappa was a Jain and in his later years, took up ascetic hood under Shri Pushpa Sena Maha Muni and was instrumental in building this 'sangeetha mantapam' to satisfy his guru's wish.

There are various paintings available for a visual treat on the roofs of the 'sangeetha mantapam' and 'mukha mantapam'. Every painting has a description of its significance written underneath the painting.

Many of the paintings have been lost due to rough weathering and poor maintenance. All these paintings are done using only natural vegetable dyes.

Though this Jain temple had been built during the rule of Pallavas, it can never be ascertained that the paintings in this temple belonged to the age of Pallavas through any documentary evidence.

The paintings in this temple depict the following:

1. the previous births of Vrishabha Tirthankara

2. the life history of Vrishabha Tirthankara
3. the life history of Mahaveera Tirthankara
4. the life histories of Krishna and Nemi Tirthankara
5. the story of Dharmadevi yakshi

These paintings are done in an order to suit the story line, in two rows from north to south, and in two rows from east to west of the ‘sangeetha mantapam’ and in a row from north to south of the ‘mukha mantapam’.

These paintings are restored with the funding from the Archeological Survey of India, state government and the Tamil Jain community.

Conclusion:

Thus from the above discussions, it is to be construed that Jainism in Tamilnadu has a major contribution towards the rich cultural heritage in the field of fine arts.