

JAINISM IN TAMILNADU

The Mauryan Emperor Chandra Gupta had a weird dream about a twelve headed serpent. He was disturbed by the dream and approached his spiritual guide Acharya Bhadrabahu to know the implications of the same. His Guru explained that the dream was an indication of an impending drought that could last for a long period twelve years in his kingdom. At this Chandra Gupta renounced his throne and took up asceticism under his guru. A group of 12000 Jain monks under the Acharya Bhadrabahu travelled all the way from Pataliputra to Shravana Belagola and stayed at the Chandragiri hill. Acharya Bhadrabahu and Chandra Gupta took up sallekhana and Halai Kannada inscriptions regarding this are found on this hill. The hill was named after Chandra Gupta.

From Shravana Belagola, a group of eight thousand Jain monks under Visakhacharya, one of the chief disciples of Acharya Bhadrabahu,(the other Sthoolabhadra) moved towards Tamilnadu through the Kongu Mandalam. This was the reason that the Tamil Jains were used to be referred to as ‘Ennaayiratthar’ meaning belonging to the group of eight thousand members. This was believed to be the first entry of Jainism into Tamilnadu, but it has to be borne in mind that a group of eight thousand Jain monks could not have managed their stay in Tamilnadu unless there was a support system well conversant with the routine and living style of the ascetics, already existing to take care of the whole group. From

the Kongu region the group got divided itself into minor groups and dispersed through the entire state.

In Tamil the ‘Sukhasana’, a posture meant for meditation, came to be known as ‘Sammanam’ in Tamil which is directly derived from the Prakrit word referring to the Jain monks ‘Samanas’.

The ancient Jain vestiges are found all over the state, mostly, in Kovai, Tiruppur, Erode, Pudukkottai, Madurai, Thirunelveli, Kanyakumari, Kanchipuram, Villupuram, Thiruvannaamalai, Chinglepet, and Chennai.

There are many Jain vestiges in Kovai, Thiruppur and Erode districts. Vijayamangalam is a popular temple in Erode district. In this temple one can spot the sculptures of Kongu Velir who composed the text of ‘Perungkathai’ from ‘Bruhat Katha’, the original in Paisacha dialect of Prakrit. ‘Jina puram’ presently known as ‘Seenapuram’ is the birth place of Bhavanandhi Munivar the author of the popular grammar work ‘Nannool’. At Thingalur there is a temple for Chandraprabha Tirthankara. The place is aptly named as ‘Thingalur’ meaning ‘abode of the moon’ in connection with this temple. Other places of Jain vestiges are Vellode, Avalpoonthurai, and Alatthur. There Jain stone beds and inscription on music at Aracchalur. A Tirthankara’s figure is etched out on a rock boulder at Thirumoorthi Malai.

Sitthannavasal in Pudukottai district is popular for its paintings along with 'Arivar koil' meaning the abode of the omniscients' and the rock beds around. The style of the paintings in natural dyes can be compared to that of the Ajantha in Maharashtra and Sigirya paintings in Sri Lanka. Apart from this there are many Jain sites in this district as early Tamil Jains were traders and Pudukottai is in the trade route between the Chola and Pandiya Kingdoms of the erstwhile Tamilazhagam.

At Jinakanchi Thiruparutthikkundram in Kanchipuram, there exists an ancient Jain Trailokyaswamy temple for Mahaveera, dating back to a period around two thousand years ago. This is now under the Archaeological Survey of India. The Sangeetha Mantapam was built by Irugappa, a chieftain under Harihara and Bukka of the Vijayanagara empire. The mantapam is adorned with roof murals depicting the previous birth cycles and 'Pancha Kalyanama' in the life history of Vrishabhadeva, life history of Mahaveera, Neminatha, Krishna and also Yakshi Dharmadevi.

At Karanthai, a hamlet of about 13 kms from Kanchipuram, the sanctum sanctorum of Kunthu Nathar Jain temple, is unique with the stucco figures in depiction of the different celestials along with their vahanas attending the 'Samava Saranam', the divine pavilion of Kunthu Natha Tirthankara. There are also roof

mural paintings depicting the scenes from the earlier birth cycles and the Pancha Kalyanams in the life history of Vrishabhadeva.

When Jainism started losing its original glory after the Pallava Emperor Mahendra Varman got converted to Saivism, the Jina Kanchi Mutt was shifted to Mel Sithamur near Gingee. The Simmapuri Nathar (Parswa Nathar) temple here is noteworthy.

The famous sculptural panel popularly known as ‘Arjuna’s Tapas’ at Thriuvidadanthai near Mahabalipuram was originally a depiction of the scene from Sagara Chakravarti episode from Adhinatha Puranam as explained in the Tamil text Jeeva Sambathanai as per the research paper by the renowned scholar Mylai Seeni. Venkatasamy.

Thiruvalluvar (The author of the Magnum opus Thirukkural) temple at Mylapore was once a Jain temple. This is evident from ‘Jeeva Bandhu’ T.S. Sripal’s book in Tamil ‘Tamizhagathil Jainam’ wherein he explained that it was referred to as ‘Nainar Koil’ by an elderly lady when he had asked her to guide him the way for his visit to the temple with Tamil scholars Thiru Vi. Ka. And others. Tamil Jains are known as Nainars.

Once there was a Neminathar temple on the coast of Santhome, Mylapore, which was buried under the Bay of Bengal during a tsunami. There were verses in

praise of Neminatha Tirthanakara of Mylapore in the Tamil texts ‘Thiru Nootrandhaadhi’ and ‘Mylai Neminathar Pathigam’. The main sculpture was retrieved and taken to Simmapuri Nathar temple at Mel Sithamur. Yakshi Dharmadevi sculpture was installed at the temple at Ilangadu village near Vandavasi. The Panchaloka Idols of Nemi Tirthanakara and his yakshi Dharmadevi were taken to the temple at Peramandur in Villupuram district. This information can be seen inscribed on the pedestal of the metal idol of the Tirthankara.

At Thriumalai near Arni, there is Kunthavai Jain temple, named after the Chola princess Kunthavai who donated towards the construction of this temple. It is believed that the Samavasaranam of Nemi Tirthankara was held here. There are foot prints of the Neminatha’s Chief Ganadharas are seen on top of the hill adjacent to the temple. There is a cave in the hill adjacent to the temple, where paintings with vegetable dyes can be seen.

AT Thriunathar kundram near Gingee in Thiruvannaamalai district, Bass relief sculptures of twenty four Tirthankaras are found on the hill. At Thriunarungkundram near Ulundurpettai in Villupuram district, Parswanatha is worshipped as ‘Appandai Natha’ as Appar, one of the four Saivaite quarter was an devotee of this Tirthankara when he was a head of a Jain Mutt at

Thriuppaathirippuliyur in the name of Dharmasenar before his conversion back to Saivism (as suggested by his sister Thilakavathi).

There are many Jain vestiges on the hills Samana Malai, Pasu malai, Naga Malai, Yanai Malai, Thirupparankundram in and around Madurai. There is an old Tamil verse that lists the eight hills that have Jain monuments.

The Thriu Charanatthu Malai or Chitharal near Marthaandam in Kanyakumari district is one of the ancient Jain sites. Bass relief sculptures and a temple are found on the hill. Kazhugu Malai near Kayathaaru in Kovilpatti district is another site where such sculptures are found.

It is believed that Acharya Kunda Kunda, who authored the popular treatises such as Samayasara, Panchastikaaya, Ashta Pahuda attained siddhi at Ponnur hill near Vandavasi.

According to scholar Mylai Seeni. Venkatasamy, almost all places in Tamilnadu with a prefix of 'Thiru' and suffix of 'Palli' were once Jain centres.

The early Tamil Jain community has contributed vastly to Tamil literature. The grammar works, three of the major epics, all the five minor epics, three lexicons, didactic literary works, minor literary works and texts on Mathematics, Astrology etc.,. The earliest available Tamil work 'Tholkappiyam' refers to Tirthankara as the one free from karmas. The former Chief Minister of Tamilnadu

Late Kalignar M. Karunanidhi, a staunch Tamil patron, once mentioned that but if the vast repertoire of Jain texts were removed, the rest of the Tamil literature would have been almost of negligible value.

These are the reminiscences of the past glory of Jainism in this state, which faced a downfall on the rise of 'Bhakti Cult'. As the rulers like the Pallava Emperor Mahendra Varman and Koon Pandiyan of Madurai were wavering between Saivism and Jainism, the masses too drifted from Jainism. They felt that that they could attain liberation by mere 'Bhaklti' instead of following arduous ascetic life as prescribed in Jainism. In the critical situations, the masses preferred to be granted boons by the Gods than to be left as victims of destiny owing to their own Karma, as advocated in Jainism.

Jainism faced a major setback during the period of upheaval of Bhakthi Cult and there was an exodus of people opting towards conversion to Saivism. In spite of their conversion to Saivism, they followed the practice of their original vegetarian diet. The vegetarian diet came to be known as 'Saiva' diet and the non-vegetarian diet as 'Asaiva' diet in Tamilnadu (as per the findings of the research scholar Mylai Seeni. Venkatasamy). The word 'Saiva' refers to the followership of Lord Siva in its strict sense, but it is connoted to be an adjective for the vegetarian diet.

A few years back, a Jain sculpture was found buried underground in a hamlet by name Raavutthanalloor near Uthirameroor near Kancheepuram. An elderly person from that place told the members of Ahimsa walk group who visited the place, that it was once inhabited by those people who would not take food after sunset. The etymology of the name of the place is explained as below.

Ra+ Abhuktha+ Nalloor = Raavuthanalloor (the corrupted version)

The above one is just one of the many such early Jain settlements. The Tamil Jain community has now reduced to a miniscule minority and is almost forgotten but for their valuable contribution to the language.
