

TAMILNADU JAIN CAVE & TEMPLE PAINTINGS

There are a few caves and more than a hundred Jain temples in Tamilnadu. Out of which a very few are adorned with beautiful paintings depicting the scenes from the previous births and the five auspicious events in the last birth of the Tirthankarars, life history of Dharmadevi Yakshi, explaining the Universe as per Jain context and the different factors of Jain philosophy.

On observing these paintings, one can grasp the common themes in Jain cosmology and philosophy and similar depictions of scenes mentioned in the puranams. These also serve as the aesthetic remnants of the Jain religion once affluent in Tamilnadu. These have to be protected from further deterioration and documented for the future generations.

Those caves and temples are as under:

1. Armamalai cave
2. Sitthannavasal rock cut cave
3. Cave near Kunthavai Jinalayam at Thirumalai
4. Jinakanchi Chandraprabhar temple and Trailokkiyanathar temple at
Thirupparutthikkundram
5. Kunthunathar temple at Karandhai Munigiri
6. Simmapurinathar temple at Mel Sithamur
7. Vrushabhanathar temple at Veedur
8. Adinathar temple at Kosappalayam Arni
9. Neminathar temple at Nelliyaangkulam
10. Adinathar temple at Ponnur

These paintings slowly fade away with the passage of time and weathering. Paintings at some temples are beyond retrieval. So it is considered necessary to document these before they are gone for ever. These paintings are part of the very few evidences available for the next generation to know about the affluence Jainism had earlier in Tamilnadu.

The first six places in the above list are often visited by tourists having a taste for the visual feast on these paintings apart from the usual interest for visiting the ancient Jain temples. The paper aims at the general coverage with a bird's eye view only as each set of the temple paintings can be vividly dealt individually.

These excellent murals are seen on the temple walls and roofs. At Thirumalai they are found in the cave adjoining the temple; at Mel Sithamur they are seen on the walls of the inner floor within the temple tower (Gopuram). Those paintings at Arni, Nelliyaangkulam, and Ponnur

are of later period. As the paintings at Peramandur temple were lost for ever and were not documented, that temple is not mentioned in the list above.

Armamalai cave:

This hillock is to the west of Malaiyampattu near Ambur. The very name of this should have been the corrupted version of '**Arugar Mamalai**' where the word '**Arugar**' refers to a Tirthankarar. The cave is adorned with 8th century Jain mural paintings though most of them are in damaged condition and are beyond deciphering what they depict. The paintings were done by applying vegetable dyes on the thin layer of lime mortar and over the thick mud surface on the roof and walls of the cave. The paintings in the cave are applied by two techniques namely, 'Fresco' and 'Tempera'. Ashta Dig Palakars like Agni Deva crowned with a flame with his consort on a goat and Yama Deva on a buffalo and a lotus pond with flowers, creepers, swans, with elephant enjoying the dip are among those paintings deciphered. They are similar to the paintings of Sittanavasal cave, another ancient Jain cave in Tamilnadu and Bagh caves, ancient Buddhist caves in Madhya Pradesh. The paintings in the cave are said to be of Pallava - Ganga style and grouped under medieval cave paintings in India. Experts opine that the scenario in the paintings depicted the 'Kaathika Bhoomi' one of the seven different types of land situated around the 'Samavasaranam' the divine pavillion from where the Tirthankarar delivered sermons on Dharma.

Agni Devar



A bird



Lotus creepers and flowers



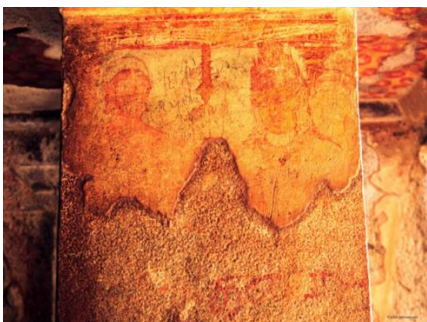
Sitthannavasal rock cut cave:

This hillock is in the Pudukkottai district. The paintings here in the rock cut cave belong to the Pallava period and considered at par with those of the Ajantha caves at Ellora in Maharashtra and with those at the Sigriya caves near the town of Dambulla in Matale District of Sri Lanka. They were done with vegetable dyes over a lime stone plaster that flaked away in most of the places.

List of themes:

1. The portraits of the King ShriVallaban and his queen
2. Dancing poses of the two apsaras, the celestial dansueses
3. Three young monks plucking the lotus and lily flowers from a pond, the differance in the two types of the respective stems very well brought out
4. Hamsa
5. The images of the buffalo, elephant, crocodile, water birds, different types of fishes seen through the lotus and lily creepers
6. Different stages in the blooming of a lotus flower
7. Decorative designs

King Shri Vallaban and his queen



Hamsa



Apsaras, the celestial dansueses



Two young monks



Another young monk



Lotus pond



Crocodile and birds



Bull in the lotus pond



Elephant in the lotus pond



Water birds in the lotus pond



Fish through lotus creepers



Different stages in the blooming of a lotus



Decorative designs



Jinakanchi Chandraprabhar temple Thirupparutthikkundram:

The sanctum sanctorum of this temple adorned with the paintings of celestial beings paying reverence to Chandraprabha Tirthankarar.

The sanctum sanctorum with paintings of the celestials paying reverence



Jinakanchi Trailokkiyanathar temple at Thirupparutthikkundram:

The Sangeetha Mantapam of this temple built by Irugappa the minister to Bukka II of the Vijayanagara kingdom, is full of beautiful paintings belonging to the period between 14th to 16th centuries CE on the roof. The original paintings were done with vegetable dyes; they have faded out due to the passage of time and have been retouched on a later period in order to conserve them.

List of themes:

1. Previous ten birth histories of Adhinathar
2. Final birth history of Adhinathar including '**Pancha Kalayana Vaibhavam**' the five auspicious events

3. Final birth history of Mahaveerar including '**Pancha Kalayana Vaibhavams**' the five auspicious events
4. Birth histories of Neminathar & Krishnan including '**Pancha Kalayana Vaibhavams**' the five auspicious events
5. 24 Tirthankarars
6. History of Dharmadevi Yakshi
7. Dancing Sowdharmendran
8. Other paintings such as Samavasaranam, Lokaswaroopam, Jambhudweepam etc
9. Decorative patterns

**The first three Tirthankarars
Vrushabhar, Ajithar & Sambhavar**



**The last three Tirthankarars
Nemi, Parswar & Mahaveerar**



Pancha Kalayana Vaibhavams:

The five auspicious events in the life of a Tirthankarar are known as Pancha Kalyana Vaibhavams

1. Conception – Garbhavatharana Kalyanam
2. Birth – Janma Kalyanam
3. Renunciation – Deeksha Kalyanam
4. Omniscience – Kevalorpatthi Kalyanam
5. Liberation – Moksha Kalyanam

**Trishla Devi discussing about her 16 dreams with her husband Siddharthan
& her conception (from left to right)**

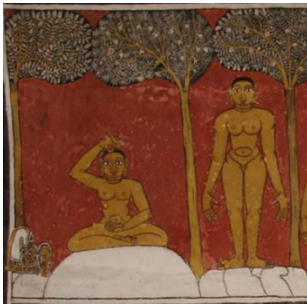


The first bath after birth by Sowdharmendran



In the above paintings, the falling of the two attendants due to the sneezing of child during his bath gives a touch of humour in the imagination of the artist. The artist has not spared even a minute detail that could improvise his visualisation.

Mahaveerar's renunciation



Mahaveerar attaining omniscience



Vrushabha Devar's mother to be Marudevi's 16 dreams

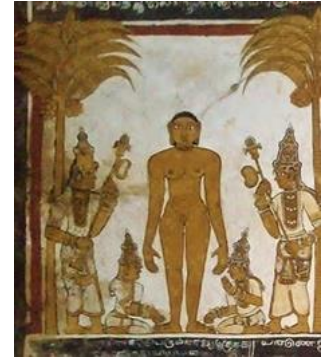
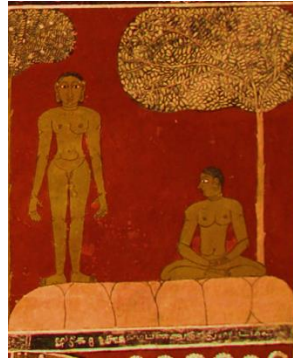
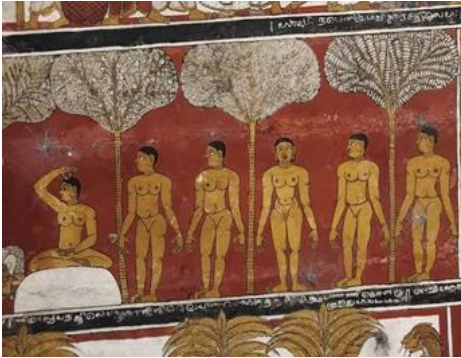


Jinamatha Marudevi in labour and the child Vrushabhar is handed over by Sasi handing over the baby to Sowdharmendran



The above painting depicts the series of events; three ladies in attending the couple, Marudevi in labour, Sasi making an entry and the handing over the child to Sowdharmendran.

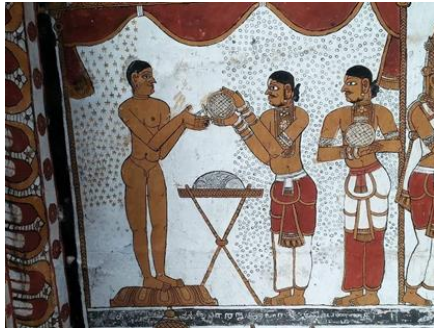
Vrushabha Devar's renunciation Vrushabha Devar attaining omniscience



‘Akshaya Truthiyai’:

When Vrushabha Devar sets out for food the king Somaprabhan along with his brother Sreyaangkumaran offer sugarcane juice as ‘paaranai’ to break his fasting. This day is observed as ‘Akshaya Trithiyai’ where it is believed that the punya in feeding the ascetics multiples in multifold.

‘Akshaya Truthiyai’- King Somaprabhan along with his brother offering sugarcane juice to Vrushabha as ‘paaranai’



Sowdharmendran with Sasi on Iravatham



Sivadevi discussing about her 16 dreams with her husband Samudravijayan on her conception & her delivering Nemi & his first bath by Sowdharmendran



Nemi taking up asceticism and doing penance with others & attaining omniscience



Dancing Sowdharmendran



Samavasaranam:

The divine pavillion designed by Sowdharmendran for the Tirthankarar to deliver sermons on Dharma through his '**Divyadhvani**' to the 12 differrent groups of people which would be understood by them in their own languages.

The twelve different Ganas (Dwadasa Ganas) are as follows:

1. The ascetics including the Ganadharars
2. The Jain nuns (Aaryaangkanais)
3. Kalpavaasi Devis
4. Jyothishka Devis
5. Vyantara Devis
6. Pavan Devis
7. Pavana Devars
8. Vyantara Devars
9. Jyothishka Devars
10. Kalpavaasi Devars
11. Householders ('**Shraavakars & Shraavakis**') including kings & queens and the
common lay men & women
12. Animals with the ability to grasp the sermons

Samavasaranam



Jambhu Dweepam



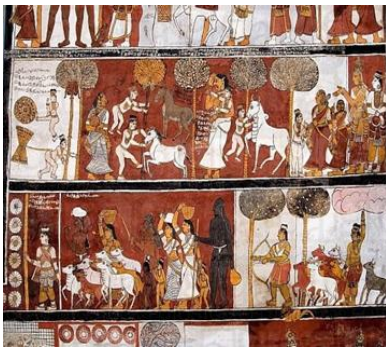
Lokaswaroopam



Lokaswaroopam:

This describes the cosmology in Jain context. This indicates the shape of the universe. Since it represents the same in the form of a human being with his arms placed on his waist, it is also referred to as 'Lokapurusha'. It indicates the higher celestial world, middle world and the lower hells. The shape of the figure is similar to that of a '**Matthalam**' a percussion instrument.

Life history of Krishnan



***Vajrasankhan welcoming the ascetic for food (Vrushabha's earlier birth)**



Life history of Dhamadevi Yakshi



Kunthunathar temple at Karanthai Munigiri:

List of themes:

1. Previous ten birth histories of Adinathar
2. Final birth history of Adhinathar including **Pancha Kalyana Vaibhavams**
3. Tirthankarars

The above paintings are found on the roof of the Dharmadevi shrine. They are also done by using vegetable dyes. The paintings depicting the scenes of Neelanchanai's collapse during her dance that triggered Vrushabha Devar's renunciation, Vrushabha Devar teaching alphabets and numbers to his daughters Brahmi and Sundari respectively are worth mentioning. The name of the Brahmi script thus came to be known for the above reason.

Vrushabhar teaching alphabets and numbers to his daughters Brahmi & Sundari



Tirthankarars



Simmapurinathar temple at Mel Sithamur:

The paintings are found on the walls of the inner floor of the temple tower entry to which is from the inside of the temple.

List of themes:

1. 16 auspicious dreams of Jinamatha
2. A scene from earlier birth history of Adinathar
3. Brahmadevar Yaksha
4. Padmavathi Yakshi
5. Jwalamalini Yakshi
6. Jinavani

7. Samavasaranam
8. Shrutaskandham
9. Lokaswaroopam
10. Jambhu Dweepam
11. Nandheeswara Dweepam
12. Jain Nun
13. Kumaanushyar
14. Mahaveerar venerated by the King Shrenikan, his wife Shelini, Gautama Ganadharar and Sowdharmendran
15. Vajrasankhan (Vrushabha Devar's earlier birth) offering food to a Jain monk*

* The same scene is also depicted in one of the paintings at Thirupparutthikkundram.

The 16 auspicious dreams of Jinamatha:

1. Elephant
2. Bull
3. Lion
4. Gajalakshmi
5. A pair of garlands
6. Full moon
7. Sun
8. A pair of fish
9. Poorna kumbham
10. Lotus pond
11. Ocean
12. Simhasanam
13. Sorga vimanam
14. Nagapavanam
15. Heap of gems
16. Fire without smoke

16 Auspicious dreams of Jinamatha



***Vajrasankhan (Vrushabha Devar's earlier birth) offering food to an ascetic:**

As these four animals were present and observing 'Anumodhana' while Vajrasankhan offered 'Aahaar daan' to a Jain ascetic, they were born as celestials in their next births.



Samavasaranam

Nandheeswara Dweepam



Shruthaskandham Lokaswaroopam

Jambhu Dweepam



Top row left: King Shrenik with his queen Shelini

Top row right: Sowdharmendran with the prime disciple Gautama Ganadharar offering reverence Mahaveera

Bottom Sowdharmendran in a Brahmin's disguise asking Indhrabhuthi Gautam to clarify his doubts and the other person is seen in deep contemplation



It is said in the puranam that Sowdharmendran in a Brahmin's disguise approached Indhrabhuthi Gautam in order to make him the prime disciple 'Ganadharar' on attending Mahaveerar's Samavasaranam.

Jinavani & Aravaazhi



Jinavani



Aaryaangkanai (Jain nun)



Brahma Devar



Padmavati Yakshi



Jwalamalini Yakshi



Thirumalai Kundhavai Jinalayam cave:

List of themes:

1. Tirthankarar
2. Dwaarapalakars
3. Jwalamalini Yakshi
4. Scene from the life history of Dharmadevi Yakshi*
5. Samavasaranam
6. Lokaswaroopam
7. Adhaai Dweepam
8. Jambhu Dweepam

The painting of a Tirthankarar is seen on the outer wall of the cave. Though most of these paintings flaked away and faded out, the quality of these paintings are praiseworthy. These belong to the period between 15th to 17th centuries CE. These were painted with natural dyes on the plaster of lime mortar.

Tirthankarar



Dwarapalakar



Samavasaranam



Jwalamalini Yakshi



Jambhudweepam



Adaaidweepam



Lokaswaroopam in damaged condition at the entrance and in the inner room near a window



Life history of Dharmadevi Yakshi:

Once there was a woman by name Agnila living with her Brahmin husband Somilan in the agrahaaram in Sripuram near Thirumalai. On the day of 'Shrartham' she offered the food prepared to a Jain monk by name Achariyar Varadatthar while her husband and her father in law were away for some rituals. Usually it is the custom followed in a Brahmin household that the food prepared on the Shrartham is to be consumed by the family members only. Even the left overs are not to be shared with others but to be buried underground. On knowing this offering made by his wife, Somilan became furious and sent her out of the house with her children. She went to the nearby hill where the monk was staying for listening to his sermons. As a lady she could not stay there after sunset; so she climbed down the hill and rested under a Mango tree feeding her children with its fruits.

At that time the whole agrahaaram was under fire but for her house. Since her husband realised that it was due to the punya of feeding the monk, he came there to take her back home. Since it was a jungle near the hill, he was carrying a few weapons for his safety. Seeing him approaching her with those weapons She thought that he had plans to kill her and fell into the spring along with his children became a yakshi. Her husband later became a lion as her vahanam.

Most of the scenes depicting her story were lost but for the only scene in which she welcomes the monk for food.

Life history of Dharmadevi Yakshi



Vrushabhanathar temple at Veedur:

There are a very few paintings left in the temple at Veedur in Villupuram district. Even these are found in almost dilapidated state. Since the paintings in serial are not completely available it is difficult to grasp the scenes depicted.

Vrushabha Devar with his wives Sunandha & Sumangala on a swing



After Vrushabha Devar took to asceticism, his grandson Mareechi tried to spread faiths other than Jain Dharma. Mareechi the grand son of the first Tirthankar Vrushabha Devar later attains omniscience as the Tirthankar Mahaveerar.

Vrushabha's son Bharatha Chakravarti sets out to offer sermons to Mareechi.



Adinthar temple at Arni Kosappalayam:

The paintings in this temple are of later period.

List of themes:

1. Vrushabha Devar's **Pancha Kalyana Vaibhavams**
2. Bharatha - Bahubali duels
3. Vrushabha teaching alphabets and numbrs to his dauhters Brahmi & Sundari
4. Neelaanchana's dance
5. Samavasaranam

6. Mahubindhu
7. Lesyas

Neelaanchanai's Dance



Samavasaranam



Mahubindhu (Honey drop in Prakrit):

A traveller lost his way in a forest. He was chased by a mad wild elephant. As he was running hither and thither he was about to fall into a well. To avoid falling in to that he caught hold of an aerial root hanging down from a banyan tree nearby and was swinging to and fro. The aerial root was being bitten by a white rat and black rat. The elephant approached the tree and was trying to uproot the tree. The well is seen with a bigger snake and four smaller snakes. As the aerial root he was holding, was moving like a pendulum, a beehive in a branch nearby was disturbed and the honeybees started stinging him. At the same time a few drops of honey started dripping from the hive. A pair of celestials travelling in a vimanam offered to help this man in distress. To their shock and surprise he asked them to wait until he tasted the honey to his satisfaction. Such is the nature of the pleasures in our lives!

The forest represents '**Samsaar**', elephant represents the '**Kaalan**', the aerial root represents the lifespan of the traveller, the white and black rats represent the day and night, the honeybees' stings represent the diseases, the bigger snake in the well represents '**Mithyatvam**' the wrong or perverted faith, the smaller snakes represent the four passions namely anger, pride, deceit and greed, the pair of the celestials offering help represent the '**Samyag Darshan**' and '**Samyag Gnan**' the first two of the three gems.

Mahubindhu (Honey drop in Prakrit)



Colours of thoughts (Lesyas)



The thoughts of the living beings are indicated through different hues according to their nature and intensity are known as ‘**Lesyas**’. They are of six types; white, pink, yellow, grey, blue and black. The first three are considered good while the other three are considered bad.

Six passengers lost their way in a forest and were hit by hunger. They found a fruit bearing tree. One of them picked up the fruits that had fallen on the ground; the second one plucked a few fruits from the tree; the third one tried to shake the tree for the fruits to fall; the fourth one and the fifth one started cutting a minor and a major branches respectively while the last one began cutting the base trunk itself.

These acts of these six people depict the ways how the natural sources are being exploited and misused by the people for their selfish benefits.

Neminathar Temple at Nelliyaangkulam:

List of themes:

1. Life histories of Nemi Tirthankarar and his cousin the future Tirthankarar Krishnan
2. The 16 auspicious dreams of Jinamatha Sivadevi Nemi’s mother to be
3. Trivikramam by Nemi as a prince

The 16 auspicious dreams of Jinamatha Sivadevi Trivikramam by Nemi as a prince



Trivikramam:

All the three acts mentioned below done simultaneously is known as Trivikramam.

1. Blowing the conch
2. Shooting an arrow &
3. Dancing on a snakehood

Adinathar temple at Ponnur:

List of themes:

1. Lokaswaroopam
2. Jambhu Dweepam
3. Karmavriksham
4. Samavasaranam
5. Ethics of the ascetics and the householders

Karmavriksham:

This explains the 8 major divisions of Karma Prakrutis and 148 minor Karma Prakrutis arising out of these. A painting depicts the ethical code to be followed by the ascetics and the householders. These are not found in any other temple.

Lokaswaroopam



Jambhu Dweepam



Brahadeeswarar temple at Thanjavur:

There is a painting of Tirthankar Mahaveerar on the outer side of the inner wall of the circumbulatory corridor around the sanctum sanctorum of the Brahadeeswarar temple at Thanjavur though it is a Siva temple. As this painting has faded out it is very difficult to get the figure depicted.

Tirthankara Mahaveeerar in Brahadeeswarar temple at Thanjavur



Thus these paintings of varying styles from those of Pallava - Ganga, Pallava, Chola, and Vijayanagara throw light on the aesthetics in Jain art that attract many tourists and connoisseurs, researchers, enthusiasts, historians, archaeologists, and lay people both Indian and international who rise above the barriers of nationality, language, religion, race, caste, creed and the like. On visiting these places even a layman can become adept in striking a balanced comparison with those of the counterparts at Ajantha, Bagh and Sigiriya. On having a closer look at these one can appreciate the intricate nuances of art and enjoy the visual treat.

As an effort to promote religious tourism replicated paintings on similar traditional Jain themes at Moodbidri Jain Mutt and Shravanabelagola Jain Mutt are exhibited on both the side walls of the arrival entrance at the Mangalore International airport as Karnataka is also quite popular for the Jain religious tourism sites in Mysore, South Canara and North Canara districts such as Sharavanabelagola, Halebid, Karkala, Humcha, Moodbidri, Gerusoppa, Dharmasthala, Belagavi, Hubli, Dharwad, Lakkundi and many other places around Agumbe and Mangalore.

Paintings at the arrival gate entrance in Mangalore airport



Jambhudweepam



Nandheeswaradweepam



Life history of Vrushabha Devar



Samavasaranam



In the same way the paintings of Siththannavasal, Thirumalai Kundavai Jinalayam, Thirupparutthikkundram and the like can be exhibited in the nearest airports and railway stations to attract tourists. Recently Tamilnadu Tourism Development Corporation TTDC, has designed a tour on Jain circuit. Indian Tourism Development corporation ITDC, and the other tourism development corporations of the neighbouring states Andhra, Telangana, Kerala and Karnataka are to be informed of the Jain circuit. These Jain sites need to be included in their conducted tour programmes in Tamilnadu.

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4. Tiruparuttikundram and its temples by T.N. Ramachandran, Government museum, Madras
5. Sithannaval –by prof. S.Swaminathan
6. Oral telephonic discussions with Dr. G. Deivanayagam

Photos Courtesy:

Jinakanchi Mutt Junior Pontiff

Ahimsa yathirai - Mr. Padmaraj Ramasamy

Mr. Jinadas, Desur

Mr. Chandru Vandavasi

Mrs. Vasanthalakshmi Kanchipuram

Mrs. Suramanjari Arni

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