Ahimsa is the supreme tenet of Jainism. The jaina categorisation of living organisms based on senses, body type, mind and endowments (ie. prana, paryapti) is astounding as these categorisations were done thousands of years before the advent of modern science. Recognition of the life form, living and sentient being inside the body is the first step. In Acaranga Sutra, Bagawan Mahavira in the very beginning of the discourse had brought out this fact and declares that endless transmigrations can only be stopped by persons who have realised that sentient life is in all stationary and mobile forms of life. This includes the self and once that knowledge is there, the next step would be to understand the reasons for the infinite births and deaths undergone.

Concept of the pure soul as the reservoir of infinite perception, knowledge, bliss and energy and every soul's aspiration to metamorphosis into that state is the essence of Jaina Dharma. The soul is denied of this bliss because of its interaction with karma particles which has been going on for an infinite period of time. Tirthankaras, with Their infinite perception and knowledge have found the way to liberate the soul from karma and attain the Ananta Catustaya qualities of the pure soul.

"Samyak darsana, jnana, caritrani moksha margaha" - is the opening sutra of the Tatvartha Sutra. The Ratna Traya, Right Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct, the aggregate essence of these three virtues leads to liberation. Another uniqueness of Jainism is its analysis of things from multiple points of view. The Ratna Traya are also expounded from the real (niscya) and practical (vyavar) points of view. The real point of view is pure soul, percieving the soul as separate from the body is real Right Faith, knowing the qualities of the soul and matter is
real Right Knowledge and to experience and being immersed in the self soul is the
real Right Conduct. From the practical point of view the Ratna Traya has been
elaborately discussed and explained in Jaina scriptures. The qualities of Right
Faith, the description of Right Knowledge and the details of austerities and vows
that form the Right Conduct are codified in Jaina ethics. Degree of adopting these
austerities and vows are also specified for lay people and renunciates, anuvratas
for the former and the mahavratas for the later. However, the content of these five
basic tenets (viz. Ahmisa, Sathya, Astheya, Brahma-carya and Aparigraha) are same
for both. While the householders have certain concessions, the code is
unrelenting for the ascetics. The Guna vrata and Siksha vrata are
complementary to the anu and mahavrata. The twelve part austerities are
necessiated for abandoning violence to self soul and other living forms, to abandon
internal and external possessions and plug the hole to stop influx of karma, to start
shedding karma, to lighten the load and travel upward to the Siddhasila, the abode
of liberated souls.

The ultimate and all encompassing vrata is the Sallekhana which is the
highest sadana. Jainism puts great emphasis on the state of mind and passions at
the time of death. The negative emotions, such as anger, greed, pride, deceit, etc.
lead to the births in hell, animal form and human form with great afflictions. The
positive state of mind, such as equanimity towards pain and pleasure, right faith
and devotion leads to birth in heaven or as a virtuous human opening a gate for
further spiritual development and liberation in a course of few births. Sallekhana
is facing death with equanimity and higher spiritual insight. Acharya Pujyapada in
his text, Mrityu Mahotsava brings out this fact by stating, "all religious
observances, fasting and austerities would be unavailing, if at the last moment of
life, at the approaching moment of death, if one does not undertake Sallekhana".
The term sallekhana is derived from sam and lekhana. It means noble process of
delibilating the body. It is an effort to realise the soul without body.
Abundant examples of emancipation through Sallekhana is available in Jaina scriptures and vernacular jaina literary works of major languages of India. Historical jaina inscriptions found all over India contain many references to Sallekhana undertaken by eminent ascetics and shravakas and shravikas. Tamil Nadu or Tamil is no exception to this as jainism was a predominant religion of the ancient Tamil country. Acarya Samantabodha is believed to be from the Kanchipuram region of Tamil Nadu. Arunagacheppu, is the Tamil version of his Ratnakarandaka Sravakacar. Scholars ascertain the date of Arungalacheppu as Sixth Century CE (Arunagacheppu, Dr. K.P. Aravanavan, page 7). Arungalacheppu defines Sallekhana in its aphorisms 145 to 153.
To read the English version of the verses;

145. unbrerable sufferings, incurable disease, senility
    reasons for renouncing food and drink is sallekhana.
146. at the end of this life time having the thought of
    realising soul's four qualities and shedding other
    faulty thoughts.
147. all mundane affection, anger and connection with relatives
    are abandoned.
148. to take with conviction and get the guidance of great saints
    to overcome the hurdles
149. not to have vasilation and confusion and keep the mind happy
150. to trickle down food and drink and recollect scriptures
    to keep the body aside.
151. to leave the body with thoughts of namaskara mantra is to
    redeem the position of lord of the indras.
The description of sallekhana in vain is also described :
152. fear of death, afraid to live, for self aggrandisment,
    regret to leave loved ones
153. and a wish for next birth, one who sheds these five
    destroys dravya, kshetra, kala, bhava, bhaava parivarthana
Acarya Maganandi's Padarthasaram (13 CE) was in vogue among Tamil jaina scholars and was available in palm leaf manuscripts for generations. It is a manual of jaina epistemology. The 23rd chapter, Samyama Margana Nirupanam, of Padarthasaram details sallekhana among other vratas. It is mentioned that Sallekhana is of two types, viz. Jividha sallekhana and Jividandya sallekhana. The former is observed along with daily avashyakas over a period of time and the later is observed near death with performance of pratikramana and prayachita in the presence of a guru, abandoning all affections towards friends and relatives, with a request for forgiveness in all three dimensions of mind, speech and action, with a committment of mahavrata, giving up the four types of food one by one, meditating upon panca namaskara mantra, twelve anuprekshas, padasta, pindasta, rupasta, rupatita and swarupa dhyana and lighten the load of the body.

Fasting to death is also mentioned in Sangam Tamil literature. The date of Sangam literature is debatable, but on a general opinion it is placed between 500 BCE and 200 CE. The Ashokan edicts (273 - 232 BCE) and Mathura inscriptions of Kharavela (150 BCE) refer to the Tamil kingdoms of Chera, Chola and Pandya rulers in the south. Purananuru, the collection of poetry refers to the practice of fasting unto death. **Vadakkiruthal** is the terminology used for the practice. It was undertaken by great warriors, emperors and poets. The great Chera emperor **Cheraman Peruncheralathan** and the Chola emperor **Karikal Peruvalathan** went to war against each other at a place called Venniparanthalai. In the course of the battle the Chera emperor was wounded by a spear that pierced body from front to back. The wound
at on the back in a battle was considered as a humiliation and the Chera emperor undertook fasting to death (Vadakiruthal). A poet named Kazha athalaiyar documented it;

(Purananuru - 65)

A Sangam period poetess by name Venni Kuyathiayar, showers accolades on the Chera king stating that the victory of the Chera king is far greater than the battle victory of the Chola king.

(Purananuru - 66)

Chola king, Koperunjcholan, ruling from Uraiyur declared war on his sons who had revolted against him. He was pacified by poet Eyitriyanar and made to realise the sinful act of waging war against own children. The Chola ruler abandoned his throne and undertook fasting unto death by "vadakkiruthal" tradition. On hearing this, his friend and poet, Pisirandaiyar also commenced the performance of "vadakkiruthal". (Purananuru - 212 to 223). Coperunjcholan who was also adept in poetry expressed his emotions reflecting jaina thoughts.

(Purananuru 214)

Who do not have the right faith without blemishes of doubt and without a
strong mind, start performing the meritorious deeds. Those who aim for elephant will find it, those who aim for small bird may go empty handed! If the honourable men aim for the noblest achievement, they shall gain as per their karma. They may reach the heaven to enjoy without activity, and if they do not wish for such pleasures also, they may never have to be born again! And if they are not to be born again, they will achieve the fame as high as the Himalayas. To die with a body devoid of bad karmas is the height of all austerities.

Nilakesi, the tamil jaina classical literature of comparative religion (5 CE) defends the practice of Sallekhana.

(Nilakesi - Mokkala Vada - 321).

In reply to Mokkala, a buddhist monk, Neelakesi states that sallekhana is adopted by people who are at the end of their life time and renounce all possessions including body and abandon maintenance of such worldly possessions. No benefit will avail by belittling such noble men showing the path.

Samaya Divakara Vamana Muni, ("Samaya Divakara Virutti, written by Vamana muni in the manipravala style. Vamana muni has been identified with Mallisena Vamana, the famous Jaina teacher who flourished at Jina-Kanci in the fourteenth century A.D." - Prof. R. Champakalakshmi, Jain Literature in Tamil, online Jainsamaj.org); in his commentary reiterates that sallekhana is to abandon the regret for dying and to give up attachment towards the body, to observe equanimity and to avoid anxiety. He further alludes the transmigration to a travel and wants the sallekhana observer to pack the food, viz. Panca Namaskar Mahamantra, Ratna Traya and undeterred
samyaktva, for such a travel. He also quotes in his commentary from an unknown literary source;

When the house is on fire, it is not possible to remove all articles, only the important and valuable articles are removed. Similarly, one who is in death bed, should be equanimous, desire-less and should carry compassion that is dharma.

Silappadigaram, the Tamil epic of post Sangam period (2 CE) has a reference to the practice of Sallekhana. Kavundi Adigal, a Jain sadhvi, observed Sallekhana and left her mortal body on hearing about the tragic death of Kovalan, Kanngagi, the Pandiya ruler, his queen and the destruction of Madurai city. Earlier she had accompanied Kovalan and Kannagi in their epic journey from Chola country to the Pandya country. During this journey, human sufferings on account of karma was explained to Kovalan and Kannagi, who were sravakas. Kavundi adigal was struck with remorse on hearing about their death and observed Sallekhana as she felt that these people's bad karma led them to her for the journey.

Sirupanchamulam, is a post sangam period poetic work by the Jain author Kaari Asaan. While praising the merits of offering food to the deserving, this ancient Tamil work refers to Sallekhana.
There is a tradition of performing annual Nischadi Puja to Acharya Akalanka at Munigiri Karanthai Jain temple near Kanchipuram. During the annual ten day Brahmotsava period, on one of the days a procession is taken to the temple tank bund where the nischadi foot prints of Acharya Akalanka is sculptured and Nischadi (sallekhana) puja is performed. It is believed that Acharya Akalanka observed sallekhana at Munigiri Karanthai.

These literary and other epigraphical recordings about Sallekhana in the ancient Tamil country vouchsafe the glorious jaina presence in the past and social acceptance of the practice of Sallekhana in Tamil Nadu. The practice of sallekhana is to be viewed in the entirety of jaina ethical principles and the fundamental quest for liberation inherent in all jaina followers. Denying sallekhana to jains is denying essential practice of jainism.

In the recent past, Sripalavarniji a tamil jain and former head of jina kanchi and simmanagadde basti jain math and an author of modern commentaries on jaina siddantha observed sallekhana at Sammedasigarji. Sri Gajapathi Sagarji, a jaina scholar with multilingual talent, Sri Adhi Sagarji, founder of Sri Srutakevali Badrabahu Sevadal and Shrutakevali tamil magazine, Sri Veera Sagarji, whose pioneering efforts led to the protection and development of Acharya Kund Kunda Nagar, Poonur Hills and Sri Subhadra Sagarji (former madathipathi of Melsittamur Jain Math) had observed sallekhana. Recently, Smt. Marudevi Ammal, a lay follower accomplished sallekhana in the month of November, 2015.
Reference: