

The remains of deserted Jain cave sites, weathered rock-cut reliefs, sculptures discovered in fields and now displayed in museums, as well as the few temples still in use in Tamil Nadu give a glimpse of a thriving Jain culture of a bygone era

Indian Aesthetics On the trail of Jain art in Tamil Nadu

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Jainism in Tamil Nadu: Beginnings, Rise & Decline
A little over two millennia ago, a Jain monk by the name of Bhadrabahu led a group of 8000 followers from the Magadha region southwards to escape a famine which had persisted for 12 years.^[1] While some of the Jains settled in the Mysore region of present-day Karnataka, many others migrated further south to the region around Madurai.

This was the beginning of Jainism in Tamil Nadu, which soon spread and grew in strength. There were several rock-cut and structural temples in Tamil Nadu, as well as inscriptions indicating royal patronage—particularly Pandian and Chola—along with support from the local population, especially the rich merchant class. Based on these inscriptions, historians estimate that the Jain population of Tamil Nadu was at its peak in the 8th and 9th centuries, with the maximum number of Jains concentrated in Kanchipuram, Madurai, Pudukkottai, Tiruchirappalli, and Tirunelveli.^[2]

However, the rise of Shaivism and Vaishnavism in Tamil Nadu brought Jainism

into direct conflict, with Shaivite and Vaishnavite saints leading organised efforts against Jainism.^[3] With increasing persecution and resultant loss of patronage, some Jains migrated to neighbouring Karnataka, while others—especially the richer Jains—got assimilated into the dominant Shaiva and Vaishnava communities in Tamil Nadu. By the 12th century CE, Jainism had gone into oblivion in Tamil Nadu and most of their places of worship were abandoned or forgotten, or claimed by others.^[4]

The Jain Art of Tamil Nadu

Today, the remains of deserted Jain cave sites, weathered rock-cut reliefs, sculptures discovered in fields and now displayed in museums as well as the few temples still in use in Tamil Nadu give a glimpse of a thriving Jain culture of a bygone era. According to the French Institute of Pondicherry, which documented all Jain sites in Tamil Nadu, there are 464 sites all over the state. These include cave and structural temples, relief sculptures,



inscriptions, murals, and also those sites which have been claimed by either Shaivites or Vaishnavites.^[5]

In this article, we look at four different Jain sites in Tamil Nadu which still have vestiges of the stunning art that once attracted devotees and the itinerant traveller centuries ago.

Sittanavasal: The rocky hillocks of Sittanavasal, near Pudukkottai, have inscriptions dating from the 3rd century BCE to the 9th century CE indicating the presence of Jains.^[6] Sittanavasal also has a Pandian era Jain cave temple, the Arivar Koil, famous for its painted interiors of which only traces remain on upper portions of pillars, beams and ceilings. The intricacy and vibrancy of these paintings suggests that this must have been an important Jain site, with royal patronage, drawing a number of devotees in its heyday. Both the cave and its painted interiors have been dated to the 8th/9th centuries CE, and are stylistically similar to the Ajanta cave paintings (4th to 6th century CE).^[7]

The cave consists of a sanctum (*garbhagriha*) and a hall (*ardhamandapa*). One wall of the *ardhamandapa* has a niche with an image of a Jain acharya, seated cross-legged with a single umbrella over his head^[8], while a niche on the opposite wall has an image of Parshwanatha, with a hooded snake over his head.

The ceiling of the *ardhamandapa* is painted, which at first glance appears to be a simple lotus pond. A closer look, however, reveals a pond teeming with fishes, crocodiles, water-hens, and buffaloes. Three monks are gathering lotuses with blissful smiles, while an elephant in the water holds a lotus in its trunk. This is no ordinary lotus pond; this is the Khatikabhumi, one of the seven regions which a person has to pass through before reaching the place where Tirthankaras give sermons. The paintings on the pillars of the *ardhamandapa*, though different, are no less intricate with dancing girls depicted in great detail. One of the pillars show a couple, who from their headgear and ornaments, could possibly be royals.



This page, top: Anaimalai, an unidentified Tirthankara with traces of painting in Saffron, red, green and gold; above: Kazhugumalai - Detail of one of the enthroned Jinas

Opposite page, top: Anaimalai – entrance to the Ladan Temple; bottom: Tiruparuttikunram – the Sangeeta Mandapa at the Trilokyanathswami Temple. The painted pillars and ceilings can be seen here

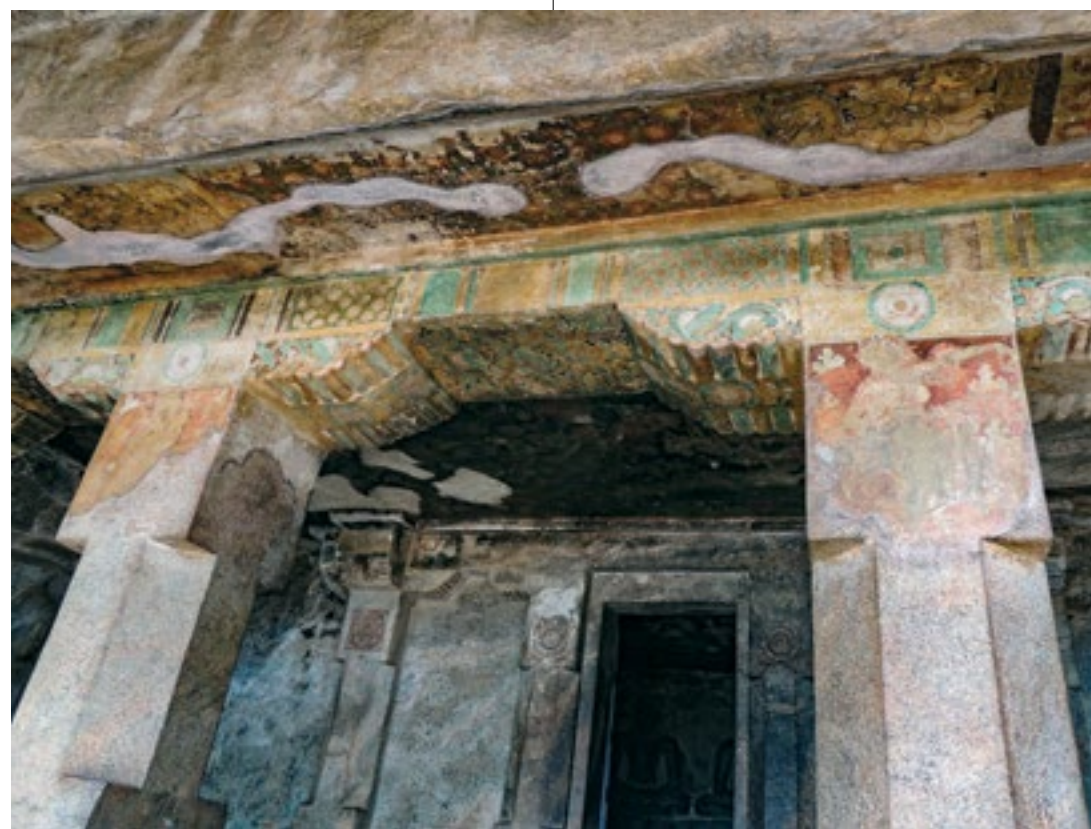


The *garbhagriha* is a square chamber with three figures carved into the back wall. Two of these figures are Tirthankaras (though they cannot be individually identified), while the third is an *acharya*. The sanctum's ceiling, which has the Dharma Chakra carved on it, is also painted with decorative patterns of which only traces remain.

Kazhugumalai : Located near Kovilpatti in Tirunelveli district, Kazhugumalai has some of the most impressive Jain reliefs in South India. These are carved into the boulders that make up Kazhugumalai, and at one time could have been seen from a distance. Considered to date back to the 9th to early 10th centuries, there are over 150 reliefs of Tirthankaras and Jain deities in various sizes and levels of intricacy.^[9]

The biggest and, therefore, the most important of the reliefs are those of Tirthankaras such as Parshwanatha. He is depicted not with his characteristic serpent hood, but instead with his attendant deity, Dharnendra, the serpent-king, holding a flywhisk in his hands. Other prominent reliefs include a Jina seated on a lion-throne (probably Mahavira), and Gomateshwara (Bahubali) with vines growing around his legs, and flanked by two female attendants. There are also figures of the Jain Goddesses Padmavati and Ambika, both depicted separately and not as attendant deities to the Tirthankaras.

Nearly all the reliefs are accompanied by inscriptions, which give details of the patrons who commissioned them – mostly revered acharyas, and their lay and monastic



This page, top: Sittanavasal – pillars of the Ardamandapa, with traces of the paintings on the upper portions; above: Sittanavasal – view of the entrance to the Arivar Koil

Opposite page, top: Kazhugumalai – one of the longest series of reliefs, depicting Tirthankaras, some enthroned, some seated in meditation. On the lower right, there are two panels,

one depicting a laywoman kneeling near a Jina, and the other, Padmavati bottom: Tiruparuttikunram – Indra giving the ceremonial bath to a Tirthankara after his

birth. This auspicious event is known as Janma Kalyanaka and is one of the Pancha Kalyanaka, or auspicious events that marks the life of a Tirthankara



disciples.^[10] It is noteworthy that a number of female *acharyas* are mentioned in the inscriptions as well as patrons from Tirunelveli, Cuddalore, Kanyakumari, and far away Kanchipuram. Thus, Kazhugumalai served as an important pilgrim centre for local and non-local Jains.

Anaimalai: The hills around Madurai, especially Pasumalai and Anaimalai, were initially used by Jain monks for shelter, with the natural caverns formed in these hills offering the perfect spots for meditation. As patronage for Jainism grew, relief sculptures started getting commissioned on these hills. According to the inscriptions at Anaimalai, the reliefs were carved due to the efforts of a Jain monk called Ajjanandi in the 9th and 10th centuries CE.

Today, many of these reliefs are inaccessible, except to the most persistent seeker, due to thorny shrubs and no discernible path. These sculptures were once brightly painted, sometimes with gold, but only traces remain giving an indication of just how grand they would have once been. Like at Kazhugumalai, the recognisable reliefs at Anaimalai are those of Parshwanatha, Gomateshwara (flanked by two female attendants), and Goddess Ambika.

A short distance from the relief sculptures is the Ladan Cave Temple, also carved out of the Anaimalai Hill at Narsingapuram. The information board at the entrance to this site identifies the Ladan Temple as an 8th century CE Pandian-era structure and that it is a Murugan temple. It also mentions that based on an inscription found at the temple, it was renovated



in the 9th century, but does not give details.

The sanctum sanctorum of the Ladan Temple has a raised platform, which could have served as a bed for a Jain *muni* residing there. The sculptures, which are of a different rock type, seem to have been added at a later stage. This is not unusual, for occupying places of worship of other faiths and 'converting' them was quite the norm of that period and not an exception.

Tiruparuttikunram: Kanchipuram was one of the major centres for Jainism, with temples at Tirumalaipuram and Tiruparuttikunram. The latter is today a suburb of Kanchipuram city, but was known centuries ago as Jinna Kanchi or Jain Kanchi.^[3]



There are two Jain Temples at Tiruparuttikunram – the Trilokyanathswami Temple and the Chandraprabha Temple – both built in the architectural style of a typical Dravidian temple. While the Trilokyanathswami Temple is larger of the two, the Chandraprabha Temple is believed to be the older one (8th century CE) based on stylistic details. The inscriptions found at the Trilokyanathswami Temple reveal it was built by the Chola emperors Rajendra I (c.1014-44) and Kulottunga I (c.1070-1120).

While the Chola emperors built the sanctum, *ardhamandapa* and the *mukhamandapa* of the Trilokyanathswami Temple, Irusappar, a Jain monk, added a *sangeeta mandapa* or musical hall in 14th century CE. The *sangeeta mandapa* gets its name from the musical quality of the 24 pillars when struck. It is this *mandapa*, which has some of the most remarkable Jain murals in India painted using ochre red and yellow and black for outline. These murals, which were painted in the 16th century CE, have all 24 Tirthankaras depicted as well as narrative panels on Jaina philosophy and cosmology, including the legends of Mahavira, Neminatha and Ambika in full artistic splendour.

While worship was not continuous at both the Chandraprabha and Trilokyanathswami Temples, they were not forgotten or taken over by other faiths. The Tamil Nadu State

Archaeology Department took over the two temples in 1988, and conservation and restoration of the temple and its murals began in 1996. After nearly 100 years, the Trilokyanathswami Temple was reconsecrated in 2006. [11]

Conclusion

Jainism in Tamil Nadu has come a long way, a full circle from its arrival, growth, spread and then decline and oblivion to a resurgence now mainly through its built heritage and art. Newspaper reports claim that the last couple of decades has seen the interest in Jain heritage in Tamil Nadu grow, among the Jain community as well as historians, researchers, academicians, linguists, and the state government.

Of the 88 monuments protected by the State Department of Archaeology, 18 are Jain, including all the ones discussed in this article. [12] As more Jain sites are getting re-‘discovered’, greater is the interest and curiosity being generated. Thanks to this, many large and small Jain temples are being reclaimed by the Jain community and getting restored and renovated. The years to come will, hopefully, be exciting ones.

This page: Tiruparuttikunram – entrance to the Trilokyanathswami Temple
Opposite page, top: Tiruparuttikunram – some of the Tirthankaras with

their lanchans. Part of the ceiling murals can also be seen; bottom: Sittanavasal – detail of painting on a pillar of Ardhamandapa, depicting a dancing woman



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