

# AYAGAPATTAS AND THE BEGINNING OF JAINA CULT WORSHIP

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Mathura is known for the earliest Jaina stupas and Tirthankara images. Remains of the two earliest stupas have been unearthed from the Kankali Tila, one belonging to the Sunga age and the other to the Kusana times. The existence of a Jaina stupa of the second century B.C. is very clear from an inscription wherein a *prāsāda torana* (arched gateway) is recorded to have been dedicated by a *sravaka* (a Jaina layman) named *Uttaradāsaka*.<sup>1</sup> Another Jaina stupa belonging to the period immediately before Kaniska I i.e. first half of the first century A.D., is said to have been constructed by a *srāvika* named *Dhamaghesa*.<sup>2</sup> One of the Jaina stupas at Mathura was dedicated to the seventh Tirthankara *Suparsvanatha*.<sup>3</sup> Mathura is said to have been the birth place of the Tirthankara *Neminatha* who was also worshipped there.<sup>4</sup> Mathura was actually the main centre of Jainism. *Ayagapatta*-inscriptions mentioning the adoration of *Vardhamana* or *Mahavira* have also been found from Mathura.

Mathura was the first to carve the earliest Tirthankara images. The

Lehanipur torso bearing the so-called Mauryan polish and identified as a Jaina figure, is still controversial.<sup>5</sup> Even, the Hathigumpha inscription of Kharavela (first century B.C.) does not provide evidence in favour of early origin of the Jaina figures.<sup>6</sup> It is only in the late first century B.C. or early first century A.D. that the Jaina figures appear for the first time at Mathura. A number of Tirthankara images including those of Pārsvanatha, Neminātha and Mahāvira, both in dhyana (sitting) and kayotsarga (standing) postures, have been found from Mathura. Tirthankara images of the Kusana times bear on their chest the symbol of srivatsa, a typical Jaina lanchana, but the earlier images are devoid of any lanchana.

The earliest evidence of the Jaina worship is found through the ayagapattas of Mathura, which are anterior to the Jaina images. Many square stone slabs bearing some auspicious symbols namely svastika, srivatsa, nandyavarta, kalasa, puspapatra, vardhamana, mina-mithuna, vaijayanti, etc. carved on their corners, sides or centres have been found from Mathura.<sup>7</sup>

On one ayagapatta (SML, J. 248), there are four circles, each one within the other. The smallest one in the centre is a cakra or wheel of sixteen spokes. In the other circle there are sixteen symbols of nandyavarta arranged in such a manner as if surmounting each spoke. The third circle contains eight flying maladhari or garland-bearer-maidens, identified by V.S. Agrawala as asta-dik-kumarikas. The outermost circle is a twisted large garland (maha-hara). At the four corners there is a great serpent god (mahoraga). Finally, the slab is decorated with a border which contains a four-petalled flower in the corners and an auspicious symbol in the middle of the sides. As the ayagapatta is partly broken out from a corner, only two symbols, one each of srivatsa and nandyavarta are now available on two sides. Two winged garland-bearer attendants are also carved on each side of the border. V.S. Agrawala calls this slab as cakra-pata.<sup>9</sup> An inscription from the Amaravati stupa records the gift of a cakra-pata<sup>10</sup> which being analogous to ayagapatta of Mathura must have been a sacred object.

On another ayagapatta (AMM, Q.2) which Agrawala calls a caityapata,<sup>11</sup> there is a bas-relief representing a stupa having medhi (terrace), sopana (stairs), vedika (railing), torana (arched gateway) and flanked by a cakra-dhvaja and simha-dhvaja (pillars with wheel and lion

capitals ), two salabhanjikas, flying suparnas and devotees. The facade of the platform is relieved with arched niches simulating makara-toranas and containing standing figures (male on the dexter and female on the sinister) above pedestals.<sup>12</sup> The carved torana has an affinity with those of Bharhut and Sanchi. The inscription on the anda (the main body) and the uppermost medhi of this stupa registers the dedications by the courtesan Vasu, daughter of ganika Lonasobhika, of a shrine (devikula) of the Arhat, a hall (ayaga- sabha), a cistern (prapa) and a stone slab (sila-pata) in the sanctuary of Arhats (nirgrantha-Arahatayatana).<sup>13</sup> The inscription in six lines is as follows-

1. Namō Arahata Vardhamanasa Araye ganika-
2. Ye Lonasebhikaye dhitu samanāsavikaye
3. Nadaye ganikaye Vasu (ye) Arahate devik (u) la
4. Ayaga-sabha prapa sil(a) pa (te) pratisth(a) pite Nigatha-
5. nam Araha(ta) yatane sa(ha) m' (a) tare bhaganiye dhitare  
putrena
6. sarvena ca narijanena Arahata pujaye.

According to Debala Mitra, this ayagapatta belongs to the period immediately before Kaniska I.<sup>14</sup>

The fragment of another caityapata (SML, J. 255) preserves the lower portion of a stupa-relief. The general arrangements and broad/features are quite similar to those represented on the ayagapatta just described above. But the carvings are much superior in plastic art. The delineation of each and every part of the torana is marvellous.<sup>15</sup> The inscription on the slab records the setting up of the ayagapatta by Sivayasa, wife of a nartaka (dancer), for the worship of the Arhat.<sup>16</sup> On the palaeographic considerations, according to Debala Mitra, this inscription too has been ascribed to the period immediately before Kaniska I.<sup>17</sup> V.A. Smith was also of the opinion that this inscription may be considerably earlier than Christian era.<sup>18</sup> The inscription reads-

- 1a. Namon Arhantanam Phaguyasasa
- 2a. natakasa bhayaye Sivayasa
- 3a. -----i-----a-----a-----kaye
- 1b. ayagapate karite
- 2b. arahata pujaye.

All of the above described ayagapattas represent only auspicious symbols. But there have been found some other ayagapattas on which a sitting figure of Tirthankara is also carved in the centre. These ayagapattas may be termed as Tirthankarapata.

On one such ayagapatta (SML, J. 250) there is a figure of Tirthankara in sitting posture under a chatra decorated with garlands in the central medallion encircled by four tridents or nandyavartas if seen along with the circle in the centre. There spring the four ornamental arms of a large svastika around the medallion of Tirthankara. All the four arms of the svastika are fish-tailed and decorated with garlands with a flowery pendant. Each of them also contains within its bend a small symbol, namely svastika, srivatsa, mina-mithuna, and vaijayanti. In the outer circular band are depicted four auspicious symbols; bodhi-tree in railing on the right, stupa at the top, a defaced object on the left and a seated Jaina figure without parasol at the bottom. In between these four symbols there are eight couples of flying Vidyadharas. All the four corners are decorated with a figure of mahoroga in atalantic attitude. The lower side of the equare frame of the ayagapatta has a row of eight auspicious symbols out of which only five are identifiable.<sup>19</sup> These are a kalasa, a nandyavarta, a svastika, a mina-mithuna and a srivatsa. V.S. Agrawala calls it svastikapata.<sup>20</sup>

The fragment of an ayagapatta represents an ornamental svastika in the centre (No. 35-36. 2563). The fish-tailed arms of the svastika on this inscribed ayagapatta spring from a lotus medallion and are decorated with borders of small square dots. The space is filled with lotus buds and flowers both in realistic and ornamental forms. The remaining arm of the svastika contains the inscription. The ayagapatta has a broad frame decorated with flowers and leafy designs.<sup>21</sup> According to N.P. Joshi, the ayagapatta may be ascribed to the first century A.D.<sup>22</sup>

On another ayagapatta (AMM, 47. 49; SML, J 249 according to V.S. Agrawala), the figure of the Tirthankara is within a square design of four nandyavartas. The flanking borders have a cakra-dhvaja at the right and a hasti-dhvaja at the left of the slab. The representation of the most auspicious and sacred asta-mangalika motifs is also found on the upper and lower borders of the ayagapatta. The four symbols, mina-mithuna, asana, srivatsa, vardhanama, are on the upper border and an inverted

nandyavarta, puspa-patra, vaijayanti and kalasa are on the lower border. Between the square design of the four nandyavartas and the lower border there is a band providing the space to contain an inscription in two lines which reads-

1. Namō arahantanam Sihakasa vanikasa putren Kosikaputrena
2. Sihanadikena ayagapate pratithapita Arrhanta pujaye,

According to the inscription, the ayagapatta was set up by Sihanadika, son of vanika (tradesman) Sihaka and son of Kausiki (mother), for the worship of the Arhats. Smith ascribes the inscription to a date anterior to Kaniska but not later than Christian era.<sup>24</sup>

On one ayagapatta, the sitting figure of Tirthankara is flanked by a standing male devotee on either side. This central medallion is surrounded by four tridents with a circular border decorated with four-petalled flowers. The four corners out of this border are decorated with a pair of winged lions, elephants, three lions and a floral srivatsa. The final border is square which is decorated with floral patterns including the creeper of grapes on one side. The lower border contains a damaged inscription, the remaining part of which mentions its setting up by the wife of Sivaghosaka. The one-line inscription is as follows -

"Namō Arahantana Sivaghe (saka)sa bhari(ya) ..na..na..."<sup>25</sup>

Another Tirthankarapata (SML, J. 252) with a quadruple design of nandyavartas and flanked by the lion and wheel-pillars represents asta-mangalika symbols on its upper and lower borders. The upper register contains only four symbols including srivatsa and svastika. The lower band represents eight symbols in a single row namely, srivatsa, svastika, puspa-patra, mina-mithuna, kalasa, modaka-patra, vaijayanti and inverted nandyavarta. A two-line inscription just above the lower border records the setting up of the ayagapatta by Achala, daughter-in-law of Bhadrayasa and wife of Bhadrnanandin for the worship of Arhats. The inscription reads thus-

1. Namō Arahantanam (mala) nasa dhitu Bhadrayasasa vadhuye Bhadrnanadisa bhayaye
2. A (chala)ye a (ya) gapato pratithapita arahatapujaye.<sup>26</sup>

On another ayagapatta with usual figure of Tirthankara within a design of four nandyavartas, one-line inscription mentions the dedication of the ayagapatta to Arhat Mahavira by the wife of an inhabitant of

Mathura. Both the names of wife and her husband could not be restored. The inscription is as follows-

"Arahata Mahavirasa Mathuraka.....lavadasa bhayaye.....  
va.....itaye (ayagapato)".<sup>27</sup>

Another ayagapatta (AMM, 48. 3426, size 1'-3 1/4") of the Kusana times representing the Tirthankara and other human figures is reported to have been discovered from Chaubiapada (Mathura).<sup>28</sup> On this ayagapatta, the upper part of all the four nandyavartas have been formed of a pair of makaras holding aloft a lotus with their proboscis as is seen in a Bharhut panel, now in the Allahabad Museum (No. Am. 30.).<sup>30</sup>

Both the sides of a fragment of another ayagapatta (No. AMM, O. Q. 3) have been published by N.P. Joshi. The upper right corner of the obverse represents a border with floral patterns and within the broad border there are again two thin borders with twisted floral designs. The interior corner represents two maladhari flying Vidyadharas. Other depictions in the centre cannot be ascertained. But between the broad outer and the two thin inner borders there is a pillar with an elephant capital as is found on some other ayagapattas. The reverse of this ayagapatta is also decorated with half rosette design but it has no other representation within the border except a two-line inscription in Brahmi characters of early first century A.D.<sup>32</sup>

The fragment of another ayagapatta of which more than half including the central object has been lost, represents on its remaining parts the lucky fish and beautifully executed flower and scroll designs.<sup>33</sup> The inscription at the base is in archaic characters apparently anterior to the Kusana period, and thus adds one more to the many proofs of antiquity of the Jaina worship at Mathura. The record, though incomplete, is sufficiently intelligible. It records the setting up of an ayagapatta by Sivamitra of Kausika family and wife of Gotiputra, a black serpent for the Pothayas and Sakas. The inscription reads-

1. Namō arahato Vardhamanasya Gotiputrasa Pothaya....Saka...
2. ~~Ka~~avalasa
3. ....Kosikeye Simitraye ayagapato prati.<sup>34</sup>

## II

Thus, we have seen that on some ayagapattas there are only symbols while on others besides symbols a Jaina Tirthankara image,

always in dhyana mudra (seated cross-legged), sometimes surmounted by a parasol and flanked by devotees, has also been carved. Thus, there are two categories of the ayagapattas, one bearing only auspicious symbols and the other bearing also a Jaina Tirthankara image. The ayagapattas bearing only symbols are earlier while those having a Jaina Tirthankara image in the centre are later. The earlier category may be assigned to pre- Kanishka period or the first half of the first century A.D. and the later category to the Kusana age.

From the term 'ayaga', scholars have taken to mean 'an object of worship' and therefore, Buhler has translated the term 'ayagapatta' as 'tablet of homage or worship'.<sup>35</sup> In the Ramayana too, the commentator has taken the word 'ayaga' to mean 'the gods for worship' (yajaniya devata).<sup>36</sup> As the Buddhapadas and Buddhist ayaka-khambhas (aryaka-stambhas) found from Jagayyapeta, Amaravati and Nagarjunikonda were meant for worship and not for any architectural purpose, similarly, the Jaina ayagapattas of Mathura did not serve any architectural purpose but were meant for Arhat worship. It is expressly stated in many inscriptions found on these ayagapattas described above.

It thus appears that these ayagapattas of Mathura correspond to the puja-sila of Sankarsana-Vasudeva referred to in the Nagari Inscription of the king Sarvatata. By the term puja-sila, V.S. Agrawala means some stone-slab like object on which worship was offered by the votaries of Sankarsana- Vasudeva.<sup>37</sup> But according to J.N. Banerjes, puja-sila might have been bearing some icons engraved on it<sup>38</sup> and thus it would most probably have been the first step towards the origin of a cult worship.

The puhumi or pudhavi (prithivi) silapattas mentioned in the Aupapatika, sutra 5, indicate that originally such slabs were made of clay or were the prototypes of the ayagapattas of Mathura and which, according to U.P. Shah, might have been kept on some small terrace under the tree-caityas in village for folk worship. This can be seen on a fragment of tympanum from Mathura, now in the National Museum, New Delhi, on the top of which four such tablets of homage are shown placed on raised platforms in front of a stupa. These tablets appear to have some engravings and flowers placed on them by devotees. According to V.S. Agrawala, ayagapatta No.J. 555 (V.A.Smith, The Jaina Stupa and Other Antiquities of Mathura, Pl.XX) actually illustrates their position round the stupa where worshippers offered flowers heaped on them.<sup>40</sup>

The ayagapattas of Mathura, according to V.S. Agrawala, are things

of joy and beauty with perfect workmanship.<sup>41</sup> They reflect the skill of the artists in representing a number of auspicious symbols. The religious character of these ayagapattas is quite obvious not only by their inscriptions (referring to the setting up of ayagapattas for worship of the Arhats) but by the representation of the stupas, Tirthankaras, dharma-cakras and auspicious symbols, particularly the asta-mangalika cihnās which are sacred to the Jainas.

The representations of Jinas and stupas on the ayagapattas, according to Debala Mitra,<sup>42</sup> tend to prove that these slabs perched on the vedis or pithas did not serve merely as arghya-pattas or bali-pattas, where flowers and other offerings were deposited for worshipping the Jaina Tirthankaras and stupas, as in the case of the purely ornamental slabs. On the contrary, she believes, these representations would suggest that these ayagapattas were themselves, like the image of the Arhat at the deva-nirmita stupa, object of worship, a presumption supported by the manner in which the sprinkling of flowers is depicted on two of the ayagapattas in front of the stupa represented on the tympanum referred to above.

Installation of an ayagapatta was considered a pious dedication for earning religious merits which later on came to an end with the beginning of the carving of Tirthankara images and their installation in place of the ayagapattas.

Thus, the ayagapattas of Mathura indicate that the symbol-worship preceded the image-worship in Jainism. These ayagapattas belong to the period when symbol-worship was well-established and the image-worship was in offing. On certain ayagapattas, the transitory character of both the symbol-worship and image-worship is well-represented. They actually illustrate the continuity of symbol-worship amongst the Jainas and also the introduction of image-worship as combined with the symbols.

### **Acknowledgement**

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## **References & Footnotes**

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33. V.A. Smith, op.cit., p1. XIII, Fig.1.
34. Ibid., p.20.
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36. Ramayana, I.32.12 (Bombay Edition) and I.31.13 (Gorakhpur Edition). According to V.S. Agrawala, the term ayaga has been derived from the Sanskrit word aryaka and is the same as ayaka which is some what corresponding to the platform for flower offering known as pupphadhana (Mahavamsa. 30.51) or puspagrahani vedika (saddharmapundarika, 239.3) (Indian Art, p. 231). However, for the purpose and source of the ayaga platform see R. Sengupta, "The Jaina Ayaga-Platform at Mathura : An Interpretation", Bulletin of Museums & Archaeology in U.P. No. 9 (June, 1972), pp 23-29.
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## List of Illustrations

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