

Jaina Influence on Tamils

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JAINISM IN TAMIL COUNTRY :

Jainism, according to scholars, flourished in Tamil Nadu as early as 3rd century B.C. Literary and inscriptional evidences also support the antiquity of Jainism in Tamil country. Historians believe that Jainism spread to Ceylon through Tamil Nadu. Though the Historians fix 3rd century B.C. as the earliest period, Jains believe that their religion in this part is much older than the available evidences show. Valmiki in his Ramayana refers to *Jain Munis* to whom Lord Rama paid obeisance on his way to south. Present studies place Ramayana to 8th century B.C.

The earliest extant Tamil work is "Tholkappiam" and its author is a Jain. This work gives details about the earliest Tamil community and its social structure. It speaks of the highest spiritual stage after destroying the bondage of Karma. Author of Tholkappiam describes "the Lord is one who liberates his soul from Karmas and who becomes the omniscient Self". This is the religious ideal of the Religion of Ahimsa —the Jainism.

Nachinarkiniyar, in his commentary on Tholkappiam refers to an incident wherein a sage Agasthya visited Lord Krishna and brought with him a clan of agriculturists *Aruvalars* and *Padunenkudi Velir* and settled them in Tamil nadu. Lord Krishna was a Cousin of 22nd Thirthankar Lord Neminath. The Jains literature indicates that Lord Krishna will be born as a Thirthankar and propagate Jaina religion. So it is inferred that Agasthiar, himself a Jain, brought with him a clan of Jaina agriculturists and settled them in Tamil country. The term '*Aruvalar*' finds place in one of the earliest inscriptions from the cave, presently in Andhra Pradesh. Further, the name Agasthiar has significance in that the present day Tamil Jains have a custom of naming their children *Agastheyappan*, *Agasthi*, and *Agastheyappa nainar* varied forms of Agasthiar.

Lord Parswanath, the 23rd Thirthankar, whom all agree to be a historical personage, was born in 1039 B.C. This was 3,750 years after the nirvana of Bhagwan Aristanemi. "Oriental scholars are not quite certain whether Aristanemi, the 22nd Thirthankar is an historical personage. The Name Arisatnemi occurs in Vedic hymns and implies an important Vedic rishi. *Aristanemi* and his cousin *Krishna* were related to the kings of Kuru Vamsa. As Arishtanemi renounced the world and retired from worldly life, he did not take part in the fraternal struggle of Mahabharata but his cousin brother Vasudeva (Krishna) was the prime factor and inspirer of the great war. This great war has to be assumed as an historical event and Krishna to be an historical personage. Then his cousin brother Aristanemi is also entitled to have a place in this historical picture" (Prof. A. Chakravarthy Nainar). There is no uniformity regarding the exact date of the Mahabharata war and it varies from 950 B.C. to 3000 B.C.

So the theory that Jaina religion was introduced into South India and Tamil Nadu by the migration of Jaina Sangha under the leadership of Bhadra Bahu can not be accepted. This migration gave additional vigour to the non-violent cult which was the prominent faith with the people in the South.

The advent of Jainism followed by other faiths like Buddhism, militant forms of Hinduism and Vedic religion. Unlike Jaina preachers, others entered in the field of politics and vied with each other in eliminating one religion or the other.

The tolerant Tamil society entertained all faiths and this led to demoralisation and loss of self confidence among Tamils. The Bhakti movement which gained upperhand under the leadership of saint Gnansambandar led to prosecution of Jains. Jainism which was once the predominant religion throughout the Tamil country by 9th century A.D. becomes restricted to a few pockets especially in the present districts of South Arcot, North Arcot, Chingleput, and Tanjore,. Even now there are monuments and inscriptions in other districts.

It is claimed that Saint Gnanasambandar sang away Jainism out of Tamil Nadu. It is not his songs, but prosecution with the help of members of Royal family that led to disappearance of Jaina Saints and conversion of Sravakas into the Saiva fold. This is further aggravated by the anti-Jaina propagation of Alvars —Champions of Vaishnavism.

JAINA INFLUENCE :

Inspite of prosecution and conversions the Jaina principles have not been eradicated from Tamil country. Even now one can easily find them among the Tamils which clearly indicate the Jaina influence on Tamils.

The extent of Jains' influence in this part of the land—Tamil country is inestimables. Tamil literature and habits of Tamils echo the depth and width of Jaina influence. Udichi Devar, author of a Jaina Tamil work Thirukalambagam, while describing who Jains are, says :

“They like the Dharma Preached by one who moves on Lotus ;
Scorn killing ; never utter falsehood ;
Don't steal, never develop liking on wives of othermen ;
Don't loose temper out of anger,
Neither take meat nor honey
Don't eat after sunset ;
Never decry the elders”

This exposition may suit any common man who wished to be a member of a civilized society.

VEGETARIANISM :

One of the fore-most Jaina principles that has rooted deeply in Tamil Society is Vegetarianism. Meat eating was uniformly condemned by all. The sobriety of the mind is influenced by the purity of the food. One of the famous poets of the 19th Century Thiru. V. Ka. has pointed out “The highest stage of not eating meat is Jainism”

The vegetarian food, which is presently called “Saiva food” in olden days referred to as *Aarugatha food* —the food of Jains. Even now in Ceylon it is called by this old name. The Tamils who acquired meat eating as a secondary habit, avoid it on the important religious festival days. Generally the original customs and practices of a society are reflected in the festivals. Most of the customs and practices not observed by the people in their day to day life are observed atleast on festival days. This points out the fact that Tamils influenced by the religion of Ahimsa were all vegetarians.

ANIMAL SACRIFICE :

In ancient Tamil nadu even the hunters offered only millets and honey to their deities. But later on due to misguidance animals were sacrificed to appease minor deities. This cruel act of Tamils was condemned by the Jains from the beginning. Ancient Tamil literature contains Kavyas that are composed on this subject (Nilakesi, Yasotharakavyam, Jeevasambothanai).

Jainism condemned it from pre-historic days. This fact is further supported by the fact that in Tamil nadu the “South Indian Humanitarian League” a society formed by Jains and other spearheaded the move to bring in legislation banning animal sacrifices in temples. Late C.S. Mallinath Jain and Late T.S. Sreepal, both Tamil Jains carried out wide publicity condemning the animal sacrifice. Late T.S. Sreepal was called

Jeevabandhu for his services. All fair-minded Tamils irrespective of their religious affiliations helped for this just cause and to-day animal sacrifice is legally banned in Tamilnadu. Thus in Tamilnadu Jaina influence bid good buy to this barbaric practice.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS :

There are a number of social customs peculiar to Jains that find their place among Tamils irrespective of their religious belief. Jainism preaches to avoid hot discussions and hilarious conversation and revelry on the dinning table. This is to avoid physiological effects that follow. Conversation and discussions while eating effects one's digesting capacity and there is every possibility for suffocation.

Avoiding taking food after sunset is yet another influence of Jains on Tamils. Even now some saivaites in Tirunelveli district do not take food at night.

Festivals like Deepavali, Sivaratri and Saraswati pooja are introduced by Jains among Tamils.

KARMA :

One of the important principles of Jainism is the Karma theory. In Ancient Tamil literature there are references to Karma theory of Jains. In PURANANOORU a Sanga Tamil work, there is a poem that reflects the Jaina Karma theory :

"As the raft moves along the current of the water

So the Soul along the fate"

"Evil and good are not given by others"

(results from our own activities)

When Tamils were exposed to faiths that approved of atonements, the ethics and self confidence of Tamils deteriorated. Tamils were duped by a group of people that they can cast away the effects of their bad deeds by the offerings to the deities.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE :

The Syadvada or Anekanta Vada also had a profound influence on Tamils. The religious tolerance widely prevalent in Tamil Society is the echo of the Syadvada. Jaina theory that every statement or view is neither fully correct nor wrong taught the Tamils to develop tolerance and respect others' views even if they are enemies.

Jaina authors review only the views of other faiths and never touch personalities associated with the faiths. This had its effects and Tamils developed religious tolerance.

PARIMITA PARIGRAHA :

Parimita Parigraha is yet another virtue endowed upon Tamils by the Jains. Though Jainism does not restrict one's earnings beyond one's need, it condemns its accumulation in one hand. While enthusiastically working in his own field of occupation whatever accrues to him beyond his self imposed limit must be set apart for the benefit of the whole society. For this Jainism advocates *Chaturvidha Dhana*. These dhanas are not restricted to any particular community. To give alms without caste distinction by Tamils is a legacy of Jaina thinking. This principle is being dealt in detail by the ancient tamil works. Of these *Thirukkural* is the fore-most :

"The wealth that is acquired by the householder by toil and effort must set apart for helping those that are fit to be recipients." (212)

"Share your meal with the needy. Protect every living being. This is the chief of all the moral precepts formulated by those well-versed in Scriptures" (322)

Tirukkural is a scale of Jaina influence of Tamils. It is the social expression of Jaina religion.

EQUALITY :

When Tamils were suppressed on the basis of caste and creed Jainism advocated equality. Ancient Jaina Tamil works reflect this. Some of them go to the extent of condemning Varnashrama dharma based on caste system.

Jainism infused self-confidence and self respect in Tamils who were isolated from the main stream of life. Jainism pointed out that "it is the conduct and character of an individual that are important". One's birth in a particular caste or community has no relevance. When Tamils were suppressed on the basis of caste, Jaina thinking created confidence in them. Arungalacheppu, a Tamil work says,

"Even a low casteman, if possess right faith, is divine".

In another Tamil work it is stated that

"All are equal in birth and differ in their excellence
by their profession."

These Jaina works and Jaina preaching instilled in Tamils self confidence and forced those who preached caste differences, special status based on birth to a particular caste, to recognize this and accept the the social equality.

EDUCATION :

The response to education by Tamils without any caste difference is yet another influence of Jains. Jaina taught all people without caste or sex difference. Jaina ascetics taught children all aspects of education. The centres of learning are called Pallis. The term Palli refers to the abodes of Jain Munis. Even today the school in Tamilnadu are known as Pallis. From this one can judge the influence in the field of education. The children before they start their lesson pay homage to Siddhas. Even child would say *Namostu siddham*. This was followed even in Karnataka, there children say *Sidham namah*.

This obeisance to siddhas was a secular prayer in those days which later on lost significance. But the term Palli still remains.

The Jains and Jaina ascetics were responsible for the enrichment of Tamil lietrature. They popularised palmscripts and writing and literary activities.

"Jains had been great students and copyists of books".

(Burnell : South Indian Paleography)

"It was through the fostering care of the Jains that the South seems to have been inspired with new ideals and literature enriched with new forms and expressions"

(Literary History of India)

The contribution of Jains to Tamil Literature is inestimable. They have enriched the Tamil language in an organised manner. There are Jaina works on grammar, Kavyas, linguistics, lexicography, ethics, maths, music and philosophy. Most of these are contributed by ascetics who never mentioned their names. In many of the puranas and Kavyas some of the modern scientific principles are explained in clear terms. ('Neelakesi'—a tamil Kavya speaks how Rainbow is formed, plants are living beings-evolution-clinilcal tests of feaces and urine etc.)

"That what is known as Augustanage of Tamil Literature was also the age of the predominance of the Jains".

(M.S. Ramasamy Iyengar : "Studies in South Indian Jainism")

Equality of women to education is first established by Jains. There are many inscriptional evidences that support this. The Jaina women were well versed in scriptures and other fields. They spread their knowledge to other woman irrespective of caste and creed. Jain nuns conducted schools and colleges exclusively for women. When the women are forbidden from the field of education it is the Jaina influence that

created many women stalwarts among Tamils. AVVAI, KURATHI, KAUNTI etc. are the terms that refer to learned women of Tamilnadu. There are many Tamil works that are addressed to women. This also shows the concern of Jains towards the education of Tamil women.

Equality of women for religious study spread among Tamils due to Jaina influence.

ARTS AND ARCHITECTURE :

The influence of Jains in the fields of Arts and Architecture is remarkable. Jains were the pioneers in the field of Temple architecture. The Jaina conceptions of divinity and prayer paved the way for temples for Arhnts. The earlier forms of places of worship are cave temples, bas-reliefs and monolithic granite idols. Later massive temples with distinct gopurams and mandaps were constructed. The earliest extant temples of grandeur are the Jain temples. Temple worship paved way for iconography, wall paintings and sculpturing. The cave paintings at Sithannavasal in Pudukottai district and Tirumalai in North Arcot district show the Jains interest in paintings. Jains standardised the temple architecture. This has inspired and influenced the Tamils of other religious faiths also to construct massive temples.

In the Jaina temple architecture a stambha called Manastambha is a unique feature. This is installed in the front of the mahamandapa and generally taller than the vimana above the Garbhagriha.

Patronage of fine arts by Jains influenced and encouraged Tamils to develop these arts. There are many jaina Tamil works that speak in length about these.

Jains and Jainism by their presence in Tamil country influenced Tamils to a larger extent in diverse fields like culture, language, literature and social ethics.

“*Kural or Tirukkural*, the most popular Tamil classic, also known as the *Tamil Veda* and highly admired all over the world, is also attributed by tradition to Kundakunda, his another name being Elācārya. It is said that after composing it he gave the work to his disciple Tiruvalluvar who introduced it to the Saṅgama at Madura. It appears that the Sarasvati movement also marked the beginning of Tamil Literature and it is very likely that the Jaina ascetic scholars of the South took a leading part in the literary activity of the early Tamil Saṅgama. The authorship of *Tolkappiyam*, the earliest Tamil grammar which seems to have preceded even the *Kural*, is also attributed to a Jaina. No wonder that Kundakunda who was the foremost leader of the South Indian Jain Congregation, a great author, and a Dravidian by birth, was associated with the early literary activity in Tamil a'so”.

—Jyoti Prasad Jain, *The Jaina Sources of the History of Ancient India*, Delhi, 1964. p. 126