

## RECENT JAINA DISCOVERIES IN TAMIL NADU

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Tamilnadu has a plethora of Jaina vestiges in the form of cave shelters inhabited by monks, rock-cut temples, structural edifices, sculptural depictions of Tirthankaras and *Sāsnadēvatas*, epigraphical documents, manuscripts etc. They bespeak of the glorious history of Jainas, commencing from a few centuries before the advent of Christian era down to modern times. Recent archaeological investigations conducted in certain parts of Tamilnadu have brought to light some interesting lighic records, cave shelters and sculptures hither to unknown. These discoveries and their religious importance are chronologically dealt with in the following pages.

### 1. THE ABODE OF ATTIRAI AT SIDDHARMALAI.

Siddharmalai near Mēttupattī in Madurai district is the earliest hill-resort in Southern Tamilnadu. A huge cavern in the hillock, containing five stone beds, afforded shelter to Jaina recluses like Antai Ariti, Antai Visuvan, Antai Sēndan and Antai Kubēra in the 2nd century B.C., as evidenced by brahmi inscriptions incised on their beds.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Mahadevan *Corpus of Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions*, Mettupatti, Nos-1-8

Recently, yet another archaic brahmi record has been brought to light from the same cavern which reveals that the reputed monk, Attirai of Madurai had his abode in the same shelter, and for whose convenient stay a stone bed was caused to be made by one udayana.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, the inscription refers to the first among the five stone beds found inside the cave.

The monk is referred to as an 'amaṇan' (śramaṇa) and his atone bed as 'Uṛai' (abode) in the record. He was a native of the town Madirai (Madurai) which was the capital of the Pāṇḍhya kings. It emerged into a stronghold of Jainism with a cluster of cave shelters around the town as early as the 2nd century B.C.

It is worthy of note that the newly discovered epigraph exhibits an undeveloped and archaic form of script than all other known brahmi inscriptions, hence, palaeographically assigned to the 3rd century B.C.<sup>3</sup> It is, perhaps, the earliest Jains epigraph discovered so far in Tamilnadu.

## 2. TONḌŪR ADHIṢṬHĀNAM

Topḍūr, about 15 kms. north-east of Gingee in South Arcot district, attained Jaina importance as importance as early as the 1st century A.D. The small hillock on the northern side of the village has a medium-sized cave with stone beds cut side by side, close to them is inscribed a brahmi record in characters of the 1st century A.D. It mentions that these three stone beds were caused to be cut by Aṛamōsi of Agalūr village at the instance of the monk Seṅkayāpan (Seṅkasyāpa).<sup>4</sup>

2. Mahadevan, "New Jaina Inscriptions" Paper presented to the seminar on *Jaina Heritage of Tamilnadu*, March, 1995, Madras.

3. *Ibid.*, p.6.

4. M. Chandramurti, "Brahmi Inscription from Tondur" *Dinamani*, 20th Oct. 1991.

It is known from this inscription that Seṅkāsyapa was one of the resident monks, at whose instance the lay devotee, Aṛamōsi of Agalūr, caused to be made stone beds. The name of the monk is differently read by scholars as Seṅkāyapan and Iḷaṅkāyapaṇ.<sup>5</sup> Iḷankayapan means 'young-Kāsyapa'. Several Jaina monks in the early centuries of the Christian era bore names such as Kāsyapa, Venkāsyapa and Seṅkāsyapa as are attested to by brahmi inscriptions from other places.<sup>6</sup>

The stone beds cut at Toṇḍūr are referred to in the epigraph as 'adhiṣṭhanam' (seats or basement) and their number (three) is indicated by three horizontal strokes, a rare feature not to be seen in other early inscriptions. Agalūr, the birth place of Aṛamōsi, is a small Jaina settlement, 2 kms. south of Tondur, which retains its original name even at present.

Toṇḍūr continued to be a prolific Jaina centre till about the 10th century A.D. A fine relief-sculpture of Parsvanatha was carved on the overhanging rock of the cave and a number of land grants were made for the conduct of worship to the image. The sculpture of Parsvanatha together with the cave was then known as 'VAḸVĀ MOḸIPPERUMPAḸḸI' <sup>7</sup>

ie., monastery of the monks, who expounded faultless Jaina *dharma*.

5. I. Mahadevan in *Seminar on Jaina Heritage of Tamilnadu*, March, 1995.

6. *Annual Report on Epigraphy*, 407/1906, 78/1910, 342, 349/1927-28

7. *Ibid.*, 83/1934-35

### 3. SEKKANTI'S ABODE AT NEGANŪRPATTI

Neganŭrpatti is a hamlet of Perumpuhai near Gingee town. The low hillock adjacent to the hamlet contains a natural cavern, which was modified into an ascetic-abode by providing stone beds on its floor. The overhanging boulder has a brahmi inscription in characters of the 3rd century A.D. It records that this monastery (nunnery) was caused to be made by Sekkanti Aṇṇi-Tāyāru, the mother of sekkanti of the village Perumpuhal.<sup>8</sup>

It is evident from the above lithic record that the natural cavern was converted into an abode by the nun Sekkanti Aṇṇi-Tāyāru whose daughter Sekkanthi was also a nun. The term '*Kanti*' in Tamil stands for a nun and '*Tāyāru*' refers to mother.

Apparently, the mother and daughter got initiated into ascetic order and thereafter made the cavern as their abode. Perhaps it was the earliest nunnery in Tamilnadu, where from these nuns spread the gospel of the *Jina* to laity. Similar nunneries belonging to medieval times were found in places like Vidal in North Arcot district and Kuraṇḍi in Kamarajar district. The native place Perumpuhal (a place of great fame) of the two nuns is known as Perumpuhai (a place of heavy smoke).

### 4. THE PAṚAIYANPAṬṬU SIDIKA

About 32 kms. north of Gingee lies the village Paṛaiyanpaṭṭu. A hillock adjacent to the village has a natural cavern with a single stone bed cut on the rear end.

8. K. Rajavelu, "Newganurpatti Tamil-Brahmi inscription", *Avanam* (Tanjore), No.6, PP 1-2, 1995.

On the over hanging boulder of the cave is inscribed a five lined *Vaṭṭeḷuttu* record, assignable to the 5th century A.D. It states that Aratan, a disciple of Vajranandiāchārya of Bāṇanāḍu, performed *Sallēkana* in this cave and liberated his wordly bondages. The stone bed remains as his *nisidika* or memorial.<sup>9</sup>

Jaina recluses observing fast unto death (*sallekana*) in order to get rid off themselves from wordly miseries was a common practice in ancient times. Here, Ārtān is said to have observed such a *Varta* and cast off his bodily remains. Vajranandi-āchārya of this record is believed to be identical with the great *acharya* of the same name, who established the *Draviḍa Saṅgha* at Madurai around 470 A.D.<sup>10</sup> Bāṇanāḍu was a small principality, comprising of the modern south Arcot, North Arcot and chittooy districts, ruled by the Bāṇa chieftains.

The Paṛaiyanpaṭṭu inscription is one of the two early lithic records mentioning the performance of *Sallekana*, the other being the Tirunātharkunṇu epigraph, also of the same period.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. FRAGMENTARY INSCRIPTIONS FROM SITTANNAVĀSAL

Sittannavāsal is the most celebrated Jaina centre in Puḍukkōṭṭai district having a huge cave-resort, locally known as *ēḷaḍipāṭṭam*, and a medieval rock-cut temple. Besides these, some small cave shelters and fragmentary records of jaina affiliation have been recently brought to

9. G. Krishnamurti, "New inscription from Gingee area", *MUKKUDAI* (Madras), July, 1989, p.q.

10. *Ibid*, p.8 11. Annual Report on Epigraphy, 239/1904

light. Among the two cave shelters noticed here, one contains a few mutilated stone beds, while the other has no such evidence. Four fragmentary brahmi inscriptions in characters of the 5th-6th century A.D., find place near the first cave.

The steep rock leading to the cave contains a short label inscription reading '*kālāli*', the exact meaning of which can not be precisely ascertained. However, it may be taken to mean the small steps cut on the rock in order to ascend the hillock. (Kal = leg =, foot; āli = depression, rest)

Two obliterated inscriptions are seen on the path leading to the huge cave. They refer to '*kattujan*' and "*Erukkāttūru kattujan*". Apparently, these two labels reveal the name of a lay devotee, Kattujan of the village Erukkāttūr. It may not be wrong to assume that he was the one who caused to be cut the steps (Kālāli) to ascend the hillock.

Erukkāttūr seems to be village in the island of Iḷam (Sri Lanka). This is also known from an early brahmi inscription found in the Jaina cave at Tirupparaṅkunṇam near Madurai. It states that Polālaian of Erukkāttūr, a *Srāvaka* from Iḷam (Sri Lanka), was the donor of stone beds in the Tirupparaṅkunṇam monastery.<sup>14</sup> The cordial relations between Jaina adherents of Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka, thus, finds epigraphical corroborasion both at Tirupparaṅkunṇam and Sittannavāsai.

The last epigraph is noticed on the brow of a boulder near the huge cave. Although very much obliterated, it mentions names of persons like Chirṇeṇṇan

12. K. Rajvelu, "Explorations at Sittannavasa!". *Avanam*, No.6, 1995. p.q. 13. *Ibid.*, p.10

14. *Annual Report on Epigraphy*, 333/1908

kanan of Chennāḍu, Sāttan of Kampōḷa, Kāsyapan of Koṛkai, Nakkan and Pentōḍan. Besides, reference to a tank also finds place in this inscription.<sup>15</sup> It appears that these lay devotees were instrumental in digging a tank in the vicinity of the abodes of monks.

## 6. THE ŪRANĪTĀNGAL CAVE

Ūraṇirtāngal is a village situated 4 kms. east of Gingee in South Arcot district. On the southern slope of the hillock near the village is a natural cavern of about 13.50 mts. length and 3 mts. height. Small steps are cut on the steep portion of the rock in order to have easy accessibility to the cave. Eighteen stone beds are scooped out at different levels of the cave, out of which only sixteen have pillow-lofts, while the remaining two are plain. All of them are smooth and polished, and measure 2 mts. in length and half a metre in width. The central part of the cave contains a rectangular platform, the front part of which has a fragmentary 5th-6th century label inscription, mentioning the name of a monk, Parasēna.<sup>16</sup>

Very likely, Parasēna was the head of the monastery, who occupied this raised platform during his expositions to disciples. Similar special seats meant for the Chief recluse have also been reported from some of the cave-resorts in Tamilnadu.

## 7. THE SUVANĀTHAPURAM CAVE

The hillock adjacent to Sivanāthapuram, about 15 kms. northwest of Vellore town in North Arcot district,

15. K. Rajavclu, *op.cit.*, pp. 11-12

16. M. Chandramurti & R. Vasantha Kalyani,  
"Jaina beds of Uranitangal" *MUKKUDAI*, Feb., 1995, pp. 6-8.

attracted friars of the Jaina order in early medieval times. On the eastern slope of the hillock is a cave measuring 7 mts. in length, with three stone beds cut in an alignment. They are polished and are separated by a thin band from one another. Epigraphical records are conspicuous by their absence in this ascetic abode. However, on the analogy of polished stone beds in other datable caves, the occupation of Sivanāthapuram cave by Jaina monks is tentatively assigned to the 7th-8th century A.D.<sup>17</sup>

## 8. THE NĀRĀYAṆAPURAM CAVE

The low range of hill, locally known as *Pañchapāṇḍavar malai*, at Nārāyaṇapuram, situated 16 kms, south-west of Walajapet, has a series of natural caves at different levels. Among them, the one facing the eastern direction served as abode of Jaina monks in the 7th-8th century A.D. Seven polished stone beds with pillow lofts are caused to be cut in a row at the southern end of the cave. They do not contain epigraphical records mentioning either the names of resident monks or the donors of these beds.

A structural front mandapa was added to the cave in the 10th century A.D., to accommodate an image of a Tirthankara. With the passage of time, the structural addition collapsed and the sculpture of Tirthankara, exhibiting the 10th century style, got mutilated. Recently, it was recovered from the ruins of the structure,<sup>18</sup>

17. M. Gandhi, "Jaina beds at Sivanathapur am", *Mukkudai*, March, 1995, pp.13-14

18. K. Kumar, "Jaina beds in north Arcot area" *Dinamani*, 6th June, 1991.



Yet another Jaina cave with six stone beds has also been brought to light from a hillock lying about a kilometre west of Nārāyaṇapuram. Here also, datable evidence like inscriptions, sculptures etc., are not found. However, it's occupation by Jaina monks is roughly assigned to the 7th-8th century A.D. <sup>19</sup>

### 9. AN UNFINISHED ROCK-CUT TEMPLE AT TIRAKKŌL

Tirakkōl, 15 kms. north-west of Vandavāsi town, was one of the prolific Jaina centres of North Arcot district. The hillock on the western end of the village boasts of having two Jaina caves, a huge boulder containing bold relief sculptures of Rishabhanatha, Chandranatha, Parsvanatha—all executed in the 9th century style, some 10th century lithic records engraved under these images and a structural temple dedicated to Mahavira. <sup>20</sup>

Apart from these vestiges, an unfinished miniature rock-cut temple, camouflaged for a long time by thorny bushes, has been noticed recently on the eastern outcrop of the hill. The rock-cut temple resembles three niches divided by plain pilasters having square shafts and trapezoidal capitals as seen in the rock-cut temples of the early 7th century Pallava style. But it was abandoned shortly after the commencement of work and thereby remained unfinished. The reason for its abandonment is believed to be due to the widespread animosity between brahmanical and Jaina sects in the 7th century A.D.

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19. *Ibid.*, 6th June, 1991.

20. A. Ekambaranathan, *Jaina monuments of Tondainadu*, Madras, 1989, pp. 168-170.

Subsequently, when sectarian rancour waned, Tirakkōl once again pulsated with Jaina activities. As a result, relief sculptures of Tirthankaras came to be carved and a structural temple built on the hill. However, the unfinished rock-cut remained as before without any modification.<sup>21</sup>

#### 10. RUINED TEMPLE ON KOLLIHILL

Vestiges of ruined Jaina temple, at a height of 200 feet above sea level on the Kollihill, 23 kms from Salem, have been reported recently. An image of a Tirthankara, believed to be of Mahavira was recovered from the ruins. The sculpture is shown seated in meditative posture, surmounted by a triple umbrella and flanked by miniature depictions of chauri bearers. It's curly hair, calm countenance, attenuated body, flexible limbs etc., portray the best art traditions of the 10th century A.D.<sup>22</sup>

#### 11. RUINED TEMPLE AT MUGAPPĒR

Mugappēr at the outskirts of Madras city had a small temple dedicated to one of the Tirthankaras. In course of time, the temple got ruined and the image of the main deity was buried into the ground. Recently, when a canal was dug out at this site, the buried sculpture of the Tirthankara along with a small image of *Jvālāmālīni* was noticed at a depth of one metre below ground level. Now, these idols are installed on a pedestal at the very same site, after clearing the collapsed structural vestiges.<sup>23</sup>

21. A. Ekambaranathan, "An early rock-cut temple at Tirakkoi" *Mukkudai*, Sep. 1996, pp 7-10.

22. Banurajan, "Mahavira Temple on Kollihill", *Mukkudai*, April, 1993, pp. 5-7

23. *Mukkudai*, New column, August, 1994.

## 12. JAINA PAINTINGS AT KARANTAI

Karantai is an important medieval Jain centre, situated 18 kms, south west of Kanchipuram, having a temple dedicated to Kunthunatha. Subsequently, shrines meant for Mahavira, Adinatha and Ambika yakshi were added in the same temple complex. Among them, the Yakshi shrine was built in the 16th century A.D. Remains of some 17th century paintings have been noticed recently on the ceiling of its mandapa.<sup>24</sup>

The ceiling was divided into horizontal panels and each one was painted with themes drawn from the life story of Ambika. Although most of them have disappeared with the passage of time, certain scenes like two Royal men riding on a chariot drawn by horses, attendants carrying royal umbrellas and banners accompanying them, Ambika Yakshi worshipping Jain monks and offering food to them are clearly visible. At the centre of the ceiling is a huge depiction of a Tirthankara is *Kāyōtsarga*, flanked by two miniatures of Tirthankaras in similar pose.

In the front part of the ceiling, two panels depict a Muslim king (Nawab) and his nobles standing in reverential attitude. Their head dress and garments are painted in the typical Muslim royal style. According to local tradition, the Nawab of Arcot once paid a visit to this temple and made some endowments for the conduct of worship to the Yakshi.<sup>25</sup>

Most of these painting have been spoiled due to seepage of rain water from the roof of the mandapa. Fungal attack on them could also be observed everywhere, Moreover, a thin layer of soot formed over the paintings has blurred them. Attempts are being taken up to chemically treat these paintings and preserve them.

24. A. Ekambaranathan, "Discovery of Jain paintings at Karantai". *Mukkudai*, Oct. 1996, pp. 1011.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 11