

Heritage Value of Ancient Jain Caves and Monasteries Around Vaigai River of Madurai Region

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Introduction

The Plethora of Jaina vestiges can be seen all over Tamil Nadu which reveal the glorious historicity of Jainas, its culture, religious beliefs and practices, socio-political behavior, trade and commerce and other related linkages commencing from 6th Century BCE. Not much study has been conducted as compared to the vastness of heritage present and much more is needed to be unearthed. The vestiges are in the form of natural rock cave as well as manmade rock cut cave shelters inhabited by monks, rock cut temples, structural temples, sculptural depictions of Tirthankars, Sasnadevtas, Yakshis, Acharyas, Munis, epigraphical documents, manuscripts, rock paintings, etc. The Buddhist texts namely Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa from Sri Lanka expressly refer to the prevalence of Jainism in Sri Lanka in the 4th century BCE by referring to king Padukabhaya asatron of Nigantha ascetics of Anuradhapura. The inevitable conclusion that can be drawn from these references is that the existence of Jainism with the followers of the Jaina faith was there much prior to the 4th century BCE in Sri Lanka.

The presence of Jain Ascetics in Sri Lanka during the 4th century BCE, leads us to plausibility that Jainism was well established in the South of India during pre-Mauryan period, in order to have spread even beyond the geographical boundary of Indian peninsula at this early date. Jaina religion historically holds that Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara himself visited various sites in Western India and Jainism has been spread down south into Orissa during or shortly after Mahavira's Nirvana. Thus, there is a plausibility of the establishment of the Jainism in the southern extremities of India within a few decades after passing away of Mahavira.

The introduction of Tamil Brahmi script is considered as the beginning of the history in Tamil Nadu. The ancient trade routes and the emergence of vital commercial centers, port towns, capital cities, religious centers and industrial sites are culmination of sustained human efforts of more than thousands of years. The size of settlement, formation of trade routes, emergence of port city and trade centres, usage of Tamil Brahmi script, establishment of Jain centres near the ancient settlements provide a considerable background to understand the transformation of society from pre historic to early historic periods.

Jain Monasteries, Academies and their Characteristics

The Monasticism in Jainism is highly respected and encouraged. The monks and nuns live extremely austere and ascetic lifestyles detached from worldly materials. They strictly follow the five

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main vows and observe complete abstinence. They neither have a permanent residing place nor any possessions. Irrespective of the distance, they always traverse barefoot from one place to the other without using any vehicle. They do wayfaring from place to place practising renunciation, meditation and preaching Jainism. Only during vassa months they reside temporarily at one place. They do not cook food and live only on what the shravakas (lay people) offer them.

The ancient Jain monasteries mostly are natural rock shelters or rock cut caves made into houses by the Jain monks and the nuns during *vassa* period and later as temporary residing places during the remaining period for those in *vihar* (transit) from one place to another. Academic institutions are also functioned in these places. Nearly all of the sites were at little distant from the urban centres of population, almost always on the tops of the hill or mountains and often in surrounding settings of natural landscape, forests conducive for devotion and meditation. The shelters have certain common characteristics such as rock cut access steps, polished rock beds cut beside with raised end section acting as rock cut pillow, Rock sculptures of Tirthankaras, great ascetics who attained Moksha, Sasnadevtas, Yakshis, Acharyas, Monks/*Munis* and other auspicious figures, rock sculpted foot prints, inscriptions engraved in rock, rock cut water cistern/tank/bowls, etc. On outer and inner surfaces of natural or rock cut caves, there were cut drip-ledge or rills and furrowed channels in vertical as well as horizontal directions which were made to prevent the rain water entering inside onto the beds and thus maintain to keep the caves dry.

Significance of Vaigai River

Vaigai River is one of the longest rivers of Tamil Nadu. The river originates at Vellimalai in Western Ghats and traverse through Varusanadu hills and finally empty in Bay of Bengal at Alagankulum which is an early historic port town of the East Coast. The Vaigai river basin comprises of hard crystalline rock masses and metamorphosed rocks associated with charnockites and pink granite. Vaigai River passes through Madurai. Madurai is one of the ancient and largest capital cities in Pandya Nadu region located on the banks of river Vaigai.

The fact that there are several habitation mounds in and around the Vaigai river valley indicates its importance. Among the epigraphically records, one of the earliest inscriptions of India surfaces in this river valley. The various typology of heritage in this region range from antiquities like Urn, micro lithic tools, coins, Jain Rock shelters/caves, Jain rock beds, sculptures, memorial stones, ancient settlements, habitation mounds, archaeological remains etc.

Among the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions engraved on Jain rock beds and rock shelters, nearly 80% come from the region particularly in mid Vaigai river valley lying between Madurai and Teni Town. All the important Jain centres with Tamil Brahmi inscriptions can be datable from the 4th BCE which are found on this route. This was a trade route connecting Pandya Nadu Kingdom to Cheras on west.

The recent excavation at Keeladi village on the Bank of Vaigai River in Madurai conducted by ASI has claimed that the settlement unearthed is more than 3000 years old as the archaeological evidences found are similar to the Harappan civilization. These new discoveries lead us to study the linkages of historical layering from pre-historic period.

Madurai region

Madurai was historically a prominent and an important centre with a hold of Jainism. There are number of sacred hills with 30 rock caves, 200 stone beds, 60 inscriptions, 84 Tamil Brahmi inscriptions and over 100 sculptures revealing the existence of Jainas in and around Madurai. Historically these are also the sites where Jain ascetics wrote great epics and books on grammar in Tamil language.

Few Prominent sites of Jaina remain in chronological order in Madurai region around Vaigai river valley which can be recognized as Samanarmalai / Kilakuyilkudi, Kongarpuliyankulam, Muttupatti, Yanaimalai, Nagamalai, Pasumalai, Siddharmalai, Mangulam, Tiruparankunram, Varichchiyur, and Vikkiramangalam.

Perulmal Malai

Perulmal Malai is one of the biggest and oldest rocky hills in 'Thiruvuvagam' cluster. It is 220 meter high and spread over an area of 85 acres and 5 cents in the west direction of Madurai.

6th century onwards: the presence of Tamil Brahmi inscriptions of 5th – 3rd. century BCE in the caves of the hill confirms the presence of Jain Monks who are assumed to have first come from North India and continued their ascetic life during Pandya dynasty period from this hill. Thereafter they traversed to Samanar Malai (Jain Hill) in Keelkuyilkudi village which is located to the East of Perumal Malai. There are three Tamil Brahmin inscriptions found on this hill. These inscriptions illustrate the lifestyle, education imparted in the academy and details of patrons of Jain monks and the academy. It describes what happened before 300 BCE and earlier. Some interesting information and facts are about the Acharya 'Ashtopavasi Padarar' and that he admitted female Jain monks (nuns or Kurathis) to the academy and made it a co-education academy for the first time. These two hills have been occupied for generations by teachers and students of the two branches of Maadevi Academy each. The inscriptions also mention the coexistence of students from Shravanabelgola of Karnataka and Tamil students of Pandya dynasty. Many students became teachers at the same academy. At the academy, the popular teachers were Ashtopavasi Padarar, Gunasena Dhevar and Mahanandi Periyar. The patrons of the academy were Pallichivigaiyar community, Kuyilkudi Assembly, Nattavi Assembly, Pandiyan Kings and Queen Maadevi. These significant evidences lead us to draw important conclusions that Jainism was practised prior to the migration of Bhadrabahu Swami along with twelve hundred disciples from North to South India.

There are more than 25 rock beds in and around the cave. These beds are cut alongside in rectangular shape in linear fashion. There is another cave in the northeastern side of the first one.

7th to 10th century CE: the emergence of idol worshipped by Jain monks can be seen during this period. An Important sculpture with art value from Pandya dynasty is present here. The 9th century CE Tirthankara idol sculpted on a strong rock base (pedestal) is found. The Tirthankara sculpture is in the position of sitting in 'Artha-Padmasana' posture on a parallel lion throne being carried by three lions. The lion signifies that it is an idol of 24th Tirthankar Lord Mahavir. A big horizontal pillow is present behind him along with two Makaras. Yaksha and Yakshi are present on either side with fly whisks. A halo is seen around his back. A 'Kevala tree' with bell shaped flowers and tendril like branches and a small triple layered umbrella is above his head providing shade to him.

On outer surface of the big cave there are two base sculptures of Lord Mahavir (presence of Lion). It can also be confirmed that the sculpture is of Tirthankar due to presence of Kevala tree and a triple umbrella. There are 'Vattezhuthu' inscriptions present under these two sculptures. These inscriptions states that sculptures are made by two students on behalf of the patrons of Maadevi Perumpalli Academy'. We can infer that The Jain Academy was in function and famous till the 10th century CE. From the inscription we come to know how the Jain monasteries were protected as well as supported by the communities. This monastery and academy were watch guarded by a community called 'Pallichivigaiyars' whose job was to carry the 'Pallakku or Chivigai' of Kings, Queens, Ministers and royal people.

Samanarmalai / Keelakuyilkudi

In Tamil Samanar means Jaina and malai means hill, suggesting the name Samanarmalai or Jain hill or Hill of Jainas. It is an elongated massive rocky hill complex stretching in east-west direction spread around 3 km located around 5 km to the south of Vaigai River in a Keelakuyilkudi village of Madurai. Historically it is a part of

'Thiruvuvagam' cluster of hills. It is a picturesque site with natural rocky setting and a water body at the foot hill. The Samanarmalai complex, in wider sense, includes the adjacent hills at Muttupatti and Kongarpuliyankulam with Tamil Brahmi inscriptions dating from 2nd century BCE on paleographic evidence. Samanarmalai was closely associated with the famous Jaina monastery known as Thirukkattampalli at Kurandi village which is around 6 km in south east of direction of the hill. There are three important epigraphical records found on this hill.

Pechipallam and Maadevi Perumpalli

The monastery seems to have flourished during this period. A flight of rock cut stairs lead to the top of the hill where we find a series of 8 Jain sculptures on the face of the rock that include Lord Mahavira, Lord Parsvanatha and Lord Bahubali (Gomateswara) with a small water spring in the foreground. This place is called Pechipallam. Pechi is a corrupted form of Yakshi. Below every sculpture, inscriptions providing the details of the patron individuals are carved. The inscriptions also provide information of a residential school that existed at this place with the names of persons who managed the school and the students studied here. It mentions of having a contact with the school which functioned at Kurandi near Aaviyur located at Madurai – Aruppukottai main road around 27 km south of Keelakuyilkudi. On the top most terrace of the hill, names of some visiting teachers from Mulasanga of Sravanabelagola are also engraved. During the Pandyan king Parantaka Viranarayana (860 – 905 CE); his queen Vanavan Mahadevi gifted the land to build a structural temple of Jains called Maadevi Perumpalli at this hill. The land donated to build a temple by the queen who was in Kongarpuliyankulam village. Only the plinth of stone base is remaining now with an inscription belonging to the same king's period. From this record we come to know the name of the village as Uyirkudi and the hill as Thiruvuvagam. The name is changed as Amirthaparakramanallur. Details of some lands near the village, donated to this Jain temple, are also known from this record. We learn from these inscriptions of a great Jain school – Palli that existed in Kurandi. Gunasena Dhevar was an important teacher in that school and his students

were instrumental in commissioning these bas relief sculptures. Inscriptions of 12th century CE on the plinth rock of the ruined Jain temple above Pechipallam refer to visits of senior Jain monks from Sravanabelagola, Some of them chose to undertake Sallekhana (fast unto death) on Samanarmalai. The inscriptional evidences indicate that Thirukkattampalli and Samanarmalai was the central seat with strong hold of Jainism in Tamil region alike Sravanabelagola is for Jainas of Karnataka. These are clear evidences of popularity of Samanarmalai beyond the expanse of Tamil region and indicate that the largest Jaina establishment of Tamil region is also the oldest.

Settipodavu / Chettipudavu

Barely 200 metres from the eastern side of the hill where a cave located behind the Jain hill exists. Once can reach the cave by climbing few steps shaded with trees and greenery along the path. On the face of rock, there is a huge 8 feet sculpture of Lord Mahavir a 15 feet height above the ground level. It is highly significant Jaina vestige as it is a big one among the other hill sculptures in Pandyan rule. As per The inscription below the sculpture it was created by 'Abinandhapattar' belonging to Kurandi Thirukkattupalli. It seems that the sculpture was created by chettiyar (money lender community of Tamil Nadu) and so the name of the cave (podavu – hole) Settipodavu. There are five sculptures inside the cave. Among them three represents Lord Mahavira; one is Yakshi Ambika and another one Kotravai. The last one is shown as a fighting scene where Kotravai Yakshi is seated on a lion and fighting with a man seated on an elephant. The names of the persons who engraved each of these sculptures are mentioned below.

The recent discoveries of Tamil Brahmi inscriptions deciphered in 2012 have revealed the historicity of Samanarmalai to be older than 2,200 years. The oldest inscription on the hill records the creation of a stone bed by a native of nearby Thenur in the 3rd century BCE. Around Madurai eight Jain hills existed and they are mentioned in an ancient verse. Among this eight, Samanamalai (Thiruvuvugam) was very important hill center for Jainism during since 3rd century BCE till 10th century CE. It appears that the caves with numerous stone beds in Samanarmalai served as places to practise renunciation and meditation for Jaina monks of Thirukkattampalli monastery during vassa period (rainy season). Several inscriptions from Jain temples in Tamil Nadu and Kerala refer to the Thirukkattampalli monastery and its illustrious records of Jain teachers including Ajjanandi. It is very holy and sacred hill for Jains.

Samanarmalai is a monument site of national importance and under the protection of Archaeological Survey of India. However illegal heavy quarrying was responsible for unfortunate and tragic collapse of a hillock with Jain vestiges adjacent to Samanarmalai in late 1990s.

Kongarpuliyankulam

Kongarpuliyankulam is located around 5 km to the south of Vaigai River and 15 km west of Madurai in Tirumangalam taluka of Madurai district.

There are eight rock cut / natural caves in a single hill found in Kongarpuliyankulam of 2nd century BCE accommodating more than 50 rock cut beds. On the brow of this cave, three Tamil Brahmi inscriptions are engraved. These are dated to 2nd – 1st centuries BCE. These inscriptions give the names of the individuals who carved out these beds and canopy of the cave. It mentions the names

of Uparuva (a lay devotee) and Peratan Pitan of Pakanur, an ancient village, which is located near Solavandan. A 9th century sculpture of Mahavira is also carved on a nearby rock with vatteluthu inscription with a mention of Shri Ajjanandi, a Jain monk teacher who was also responsible for icons at Azhagarmalai and Arittapatti. There is a rock art work, in a withered condition on the ceiling of a small cave and there is a Jaina bed on the floor. Nearby is a Tamil- Brahmi inscription of the 2nd century BCE that talks about how the assembly of a village called “Vembiloor” dug an “ayam” In Tamil, “ayam” or “kulam” means a pond. This was a prominent Jaina centre evident from the presence of series of rock cut beds, Tamil Brahmi and Vatteluthu inscriptions and sculptures of Tirthankaras.

Although the vestiges today are under the Tamil Nadu state, Department of Archaeology, all the paintings, the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions and Jaina beds have been vandalized with graffiti chiseled into them or painted in bright black, red and white colours.

Muttupatti

Muttupatti is a nearby cave complex to Kongarpuliyankulam. Muttupatti with early historic Jain remains is located around 6 km to the south of Vaigai River and 10 km south west of Madurai.

There are two rock cut caves / shelters which belong to 1st century BCE till 2nd century CE. The hill is locally called as ‘Ummanamalai’. The ancient name was ‘Naakaperur’. Rock art, Tamil Brahmi inscriptions, Jain rock cave shelter, and rock cut beds.

The caves shelter a series of rock cut beds. There is a separate bed in an adjacent cave, which may be meant for senior / leader monk. There are two Tamil Brahmi inscriptions, one engraved across the series of three beds and the other is incised across the brow of the boulder. The inscription near the rock bed mentions the cave to be of Caiyalan (ie. the donor is from Ceylon of Vintaiur). The other inscription on the boulder mentions the name of the donor as the son of Cattan Antai of Naakaperur. The inscription mentions about Mucirikodan Ilamakam who donated rock bed for Jain monk. Naakaperur is identified with Naagamalaipudukottai, a small village located about 10 km to the west of Madurai. Mucirikodu is identified with the Chera port Muchiri (Muziri) on east coast. This linkage is probably throwing light on the trade route that existed. There are two Tirthankar sculptures carved high on the surface of the rock which dates back to the 9th century CE. The Vatteluthu inscription below, one sculpture mentions the name of the donor of as Kanakvira Periyadigal, a disciple of Gunadesa Dhevar who was a disciple of Kurandi Ashtopavasibhatara of Venbunadu in the name of inhabitants of Kuyirkudi (today’s Keelkuyilkudi). The epigraphic record below the other Jain sculpture mentions the name of the donor to be Maganandi, a disciple of Kurandi Ashtopavasi. At the top, there is a rock-cut tank, presumably for the monks.

Most of the parts of the hill are being destroyed due to blasting and quarrying activities going on the other end of the hill.

Yanaimalai

In Tamil, ‘Yanai’ means elephant and malai means hill, suggesting the name Yanaimalai as the natural rock formation resemble an elephant in sitting position. This name is derived for more than 2000 years. It is an elongated massive rocky hill complex stretches 3 km in south west – north east

direction and is around 90 m high, located around 8 km to the north of Vaigai River and 10 km north east of Madurai.

Yanaimalai has been an important Jaina cultural heritage site due to the historical layering of more than 2000 year. The hill is the historical source as it has early caves with epigraphic records and sculptures and inscriptions of the Early Pandya, Later Pandya, Chola and Vijayanagar – Nayak rulers. The top of the hill has Tamil Brahmi inscriptions of the 1st century CE and Tamil Vatteluthu inscriptions of 9th century CE. The Tamil Brahmi inscriptions found in the cave match with the Pali inscriptions in Brahmi script observed at similar caves in Sri Lanka as seen in *Epigraphia Zeylancia* (vol. I) (it has been quoted by the expert scholar V. Vedachalam in the book ('Enperumkundraikal')).

The natural stone hillock was a dwelling place of the Jain monks. The Jains believe that the Saints who authored one of the Sangam classics, Naladiyar, lived in this hill. The Jains reverentially consider Yanaimalai as one of the eight Jain centers located around Madurai and considered as a highly sacred hill by Jains. There are natural as well as rock cut Jain caves on this historical setting. The Natural Jain Cave located at the top of the hill's southern side (Nose of the hill) has a Tamil Brahmi inscription of 1st century CE above the entrance of cave, just below the brow on the outer surface. It states that the rock cut beds inside the cave was a gift made for the dwelling of the Jain monks of Kunrattur made by one Eri Aarithan Aththuvayi Arattakasibhan. The second rock cut Jain Cave of the 9th century CE has bas-relief sculptural panels of the Jain Thirthankars namely Lord Mahavira, Lord Parsvanatha and others, Gomatesvara, Yakshi and Yaksha and Jain monks are seen at the façade of a natural cavern located on the western side of the hill at a medium height. They belong to the 9th-10th century A.D. The names of the donors of these sculptures are engraved in Vatteluttu script under the images. It also mentions about the people designated to protect them like the officials of Tinaikkalattur, the revenue accountant of the village (Puravuvvari Kalattur) etc. These sculptures show remains of early paintings on them.

Yanaimalai is a monument site of national importance and under the protection of Archaeological Survey of India. However illegal granite quarrying has destroyed considerable portion of the hillock with Jain vestiges.

Nagamalai

The natural rock formation depicts a snake (naga means snake) and malai means hill, therefore the name formed is Nagamalai. It is a meandering rocky hill with a rich biodiversity. It is located around 3 km to the south of Vaigai River and 10 km west of Madurai. There are important remains of Jaina vestiges at Nagamalai in the form of rock cut / natural caves, rock beds for monks, sacred sculptures and inscriptions. As the site is not fully exposed to the public, the Archaeological Survey of India has managed to safeguard the relics of important Jain cultural heritage.

Tiruparankunram

The Jain vestiges at Tiruparankunram is 7 km to south of Vaigai river and 9 km in the southern direction of Madurai. It was an early historic period Jain centre.

The Jain caves are on the western side of the Tirupparankundram hill. The caves are housing more than twenty rock-cut beds with four Tamil Brahmi inscriptions dating to 2nd century BCE and 1st century CE. At the top and foot of the rock, there are Jain sculptures belonging to 9th century CE. On the southern side of the hill, the rock cut Jain temple was converted into a Siva temple during 13th century CE. The Tamil Brahmi inscriptions present near the beds, mention the names of the donors. An interesting evidence of the linkage with Sri Lanka can be drawn from the fourth Tamil Brahmi inscription of 1st century CE. It mentions the name of the donor as a house holder from Ceylon (Eelakutumpikan) and a resident of Erukattur. Thus the spread of Jainism and contact between the Tamil regions and Eelam is clearly evident. This hill is in continuous threat of encroachment from the surrounding village.

Varichchiyur

Varichiyur lies 7 km in northern direction of Vaigai River and 15 km to the East of Madurai on the Sivaganga road. Varichiyur has an amorphously formed hillock. The Udhayagiri hillock has a very spacious natural cave with three Tamil Brahmi inscriptions dating back to 2nd century BCE and Jaina rock cut beds. The inscriptions mention the names of the donors. Sadly the Quarrying on the edges of the hillock has made the rock-cut monument under destruction.

Issues/threats

All the natural landscape, sacred Jain sites, Jain vestiges like caves, rock cut beds, Tamil Brahmi inscriptions, rock paintings, since prehistoric have been vandalized with graffiti chiseled into them or painted in bright black, red and white colors, indiscriminate, illegal and large scale quarrying, vandalism, encroachment, destructions caused by antisocial elements, animal sacrifice, conversion of the Jain idols etc.

Conclusion

The above study thus provides ample examples from pre-historic onwards of Jaina remains around Vaigai River of Madurai region in Tamil Nadu, dating from as early as 6th century BCE. The Jaina caves are the most significant for being amongst the earliest lithic monuments in the region and for providing firm evidences for the widespread nature of Jainism in Tamil Nadu. The early Tamil Jaina heritage consisting of a series of largely natural as well as rock cut caves/shelters with minimal alterations required for human habitation, rock cut beds, Tamil Brahmi inscriptions, sculptures of Tirthankars and related figures from various periods testify to an almost uninterrupted occupation of these caves by Jaina Ascetics up to 10th century CE. This indicates that Jainism was flourishing with considerable habitations and a strong hold of Jaina centre in this region. Such sacred and invaluable rich legacy of cultural heritage sites possessing the important universal values for its artistic, historic, monastic, natural landscapes, anthropological activities, spiritual practices of meditation and renunciation, reflection of a religious community's beliefs that are being practised till present need to be conserved, restored, protect, maintained and be presented to the generations to come.

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