

GROWTH OF JAINISM IN SOUTH TAMILNADU UNDER THE PANDYAS: A HISTORIC SURVEY

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Abstract : Buddhism and Jainism are had emerged as revolutionary religions opposing the Vedic religion. Thanks to Gaudhama Buddha and Varthamana Mahavira, these two religions emerged and established a strong hold in north India. As far as ancient Tamilagam was concerned, these two religions would have spread in the soil during the post Sangam period. Gradually Jainism established a strong hold in Tamilagam comparing with Buddhism. Due to the Pandya royal patronage, Jainism spread in the entire Tamil country. A number of Jain pallis, and Jain centres emerged., Madurai, Chitharal and Kazhugumalai became the strong centres of Jainism. Jainism has helped in enriching Indian culture, particularly in the fields of literature, architecture and sculpture. Though the language of its religious texts had been Prakrat, it helped in giving a literary shape to Tamil language. The land of the Pandyas witnessed frequent wars and blood-sheds; as a result, it became uncongenial for further growth of Jainism. Moreover, the Cholas had not been so keen in lending support to Jainism in newly conquered Pandya region. If at all Jainism balanced its growth amidst of Saiva and Vaishnava attacks, it was only by the strong support of Pandya rule. This fact is formed the main hypothesis of the article.

IndexTerms - Jaina,Palli, Sangam, Tirthankaras, Brahmi,Bhakthi

Jainism is one of the oldest religions in 6th century BC Eastern India, home to Hinduism and Buddhism. It was a time and place of religious renewal, in which several groups reacted against the formalized rituals and hierarchical organization of traditional Hinduism. It covers many different periods of history. However, it had a chequered history over three and a half century under the early Pandyas. It played a dominant role in the cultural milieu of the Tamils and indelible marks on the thought and life of the people. Jaina vestiges the form of monuments, sculptures, paintings, inscriptions, manuscripts, literature etc. are found throughout the length and breadth of our country. It had gained wide popularity amidst early Tamils even before the Pandyas emergence into the political arena around the last quarter of the 6th century A.D. A large number of ascetic-abodes with Brahmi inscriptions and a volume of literally compositions by Jaina poets would testify to the elated position enjoyed by Jainism. Early form of Jainism was essentially a puritanic, moral based religion. Hence, idolatory and ritualistic worship had little place in it. The history of Jainism in the Pandya country can be traced back to a few centuries before the advent of the Christian era.¹

Historical tradition is such that at the close of the 4th century B.C. Chandragupta Maurya of Magadha and a large gathering of Jaina monks under the leadership of *Sruktakevalin* Bhadrabahu grated to Sravanabelgola in Karnataka and spread the gospel to the laity. Subsequently, after the demise of Chandragupta and Bhadrabahu, their disciples led Vishakacharya moved further south into the Tamil country and sowed the seeds of Jainism.² It is believed that these mendicants reached Pandya country first and other areas slightly later. Very likely, their arrival to the Pandya region could have taken in beginning of the 3rd century B.C.³

The spread of Jainism from Karnataka is echoed in Brahmi epigraph at Sittannavasal in Pudukottai. Accordingly, Kautilten monk of Eruminadu (Mysore region) resorted to a monastery at Sittannavasal in about the 2nd century B.C. Several Jain caverns with Brahmi inscriptions, datable to 2nd century B.C. are found around the Pandya capital, Madurai as well as at distant places. The best known examples are at Muttupatti, Mangulam, Anaimalai, Alagarmalai, Arittapatti, and Kilavalavu. These ascetic-abodes are incontrovertible evidence for the flourishing nature of Jainism as early as the 2nd century B.C.

THE SANGAM PANDYAS AND JAINISM

The Pandyas of the Sangam age were liberal in their religious outlook and therefore, all religions including Jainism flourished during their rule also. This is evident from *Maduraikkanchi* and *Silappadikaram* referring to the existence of Jaina monasteries (caves) at the outskirts of Madurai. The *Silappadikaram* also Curiously enough, Kadalan Valuti, an officer of early Pandya king Nedunjeliyan dedicated a monastery (cave) to the reputed monk Kaninanda at Mankulam. Although king Nedunjeliyan had not made any specific benefaction, his family members and one of his officials took keen interest in the monastic establishments at Mankulam.⁴ The role of other Pandya kings and their close relatives in supporting the Jaina creed does not find place either in literature or in lithic records.

The Kalabharas who subverted the Chera, Chola and Pandyas of the Sangam age are said to have extended patronage to heretical sects, the Jains in particular. Most of the eighteen minor didactic works were composed by Jaina poets during their rule. The Dravida Sangha was established by Vajranandi ascetic in 470 A.D. at Madurai. The Pulankurichi monastery in Sivaganga district is stated to have received some benefaction from one Kurran of the Kalbhara family. Thus, the Kalabhra rule till about the middle of the 6th century A.D was also favourable for the growth of Jainism. Under their rule, the Jains reached their zenith.⁵ It was during the period of the Kalabhras that *Naaladiyar* was composed.

It must be remembered at this juncture that the early form Jainism was simple and thereby iconic and ritualistic worship of Tirthankaras and their attendant deities received little attention. However, tremendous changes had taken place since the 7th century A.D. with the advent of Bhakti movement.

CHALLENGES OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT AND PROCESS OF ASSIMILATION

The 7th century witnessed the rapid growth of Saivism and Vaishnavism on the other hand and the decline of Jainism on the other. The Bhakti-saints condemned the practices of the heretical sect vehemently and at the same time, tried to gain wider social basis for the Brahmanical religion through bhakti-ideology. This resulted in religious animosity and sectarian rancour. Religious disputes are said to have taken place at many centres. The *Periayapuranam* even alludes to persecution of the Jainas.⁶ As a result; Jainism faced an unexpected decline in the 7th century.

However, soon it recovered from adversities and came to fresh lease of life by adjusting itself to the circumstances and accommodating some elements from Brahmanical religion. In thin process of assimilation, Jainism paid much importance to idolatry and admitted ritualistic worship of Tirthankaras and their attendant deities. Sometimes, prominence was given to the worship of Yakshi like Ambika and Padmavati. The early ascetic-abodes in h lost importance in the wake of Bhakti movement began to bristle with Jaina activities once again and came to possess exquisite bold reliefs of Tirthankaras and *Yakshis*, to which regular ritualistic worship was performed.⁷ Jaina caverns at Anamalai, Tirupparankunram, Uttamapalayam, Kilakuyilkudi, alai,

Kalugumalai, Chitalar etc., in the Pandya region are the some of the examples bearing testimony to this new development.

Moreover, renowned monks like Ajjanandi, Vajranandi, lunasagaradeva, Santisena and a host of others played a dominant role in popularizing their religion and accelerating its growth. Although changes were accepted in the mode of worship, their doctrines remained the same without modification. Jainism, thus, became stronger than before, and hence, it could easily counter balance the growth of Brahmanical religion. This new trend of Jainism coincided with the early Pandya rule in southern Tamilnadu.

EARLY PANDYAS' PATRONAGE (6TH - 9TH CENTURY)

The early Pandya rulers with the exception of Arikesari Parankusa (Popularly called as Kun Pandya), were invariably followers of Brahmanical religion. But their adherence to Brahmanism had not resulted in the negligence of Jainism at all. For instance, Maran Sendan (624 A.D.) was instrumental in scooping out the earliest rock-cut temple at Malaiyadikurichi to the Jaina faith. He was an ardent Jaina, at whose liberal patronage Jaina ascetics played a leading role in promoting their religious faith. According to *Periyapuranam*, when the Pandya king was seriously affected by a ' burning fever, the Jaina monks failed to cure his disease, while the Saiva saint-Gnanasambandar succeeded in alleviating his misery. Moreover, the Jaina recluses could not establish their superiority over Saivism in polemical and other means of disputes with Sambandar. Consequently, Sambandar is alleged to have instigated the king to persecute the Jaina mendicants and destroy their places of worship. Arikesari Parankusa got himself converted to Saivism after realizing the greatness of Lord Siva.⁸ Although the *Periyapuranam* gives an exaggerated version of religious disputes at the Pandya's capital; there is no denying of the fact that Jainism had to face stiff opposition from Brahmanical advocates, resulting in a serious setback in the 7th century A.D. This declining trend was not confined to the Pandya territory only, but also included other parts of the Tamil country. However, the period of its adversity did not last long and once again it gained momentum in the 8th century A.D.

Among the other Pandyan monarchs, Srimara Srivallabha (811- 860 A.D) and Parantaka Viranaryana (866-911 A.D), lent adequate support to Jainism and its institutions. Srivallabha's rule witnessed the renovation of the celebrated Sittanavasal rock-cut temple with an addition of a structural *mukhamandapa* at the instance Ilan Gautama, a reputed Jaina *acharya* of Madurai. Parantaka Viranarayana's rule also saw the growth of Jaina religion. His lithic records found at Aivarmalai, Anaimalai, Kalugumalai and Eruvadi bespeak of the flourishing condition of the monastic establishment at these centres.⁹

In the latter part of the 10th century A.D. the Pandyas had to frequently bear the attacks of the imperial Cholas. Subsequently, they were subjugated and their territory came under the sway of the Cholas. In their attempts at liberating themselves from the Chola overlords, the Pandyas crossed swords with them very often but could not succeed in overpowering them. This state of political insecurity was not conducive for further growth of Jainism in the Pandyas region. As results, Jainism began to disintegrate and its peace loving adherents gradually migrated to Tondaimandalam. In fact expect for a few Jaina centres, others lost their pristine glory with the eclipse of the early Pandya power.

EARLY PANDYA JAINA CENTRES

With the resurrection of Jainism in the 8th century A.D., apart from the old ones, several new centres sprang up in the Pandya territory. Among them, those at Anaimalai, Arittapatti, Kilavalavu, Kilakuyilkudi, Muttupatti, Chettipodavu and Tirupparankunram are worthy of note. Sittannavasal, 16 km. west of Pudukkottai town, is one of the celebrated Jaina centres, having a natural cavern and a rock-cut temple. The origin of the rock-cut temple is dated back to the 7th century A.D.¹⁰ The most magnificent paintings are of the Pandya king (Srimara

Srivallabha) wearing a lovely crown, accompanied by his queen and the two celestial dancers of exquisite feminine charm, executed on the corbels of the pillars. Although much of these frescoes have disappeared with the passage of time, the remnants throw welcome light on the art of painting under the early Pandyas. Virasikhamani is a village 14 km. south west of Sankarankoil in Tirunelveli district. The hillock adjacent to the village has three natural caverns with a number of stone beds cut at different levels. The first caves served as the resort of Atuman Jinendra and his disciples in the 9th century A.D. Sculptural depictions of Jaina deities are conspicuous by their absence.

An unfinished Jaina rock-cut temple of the 7th century A.D. could be seen on the slopes of Chokkampatti hillock, situated 24km. northeast of Tenkasi in Tirunelveli district. The edifice consists of a shrine preceded by a rectangular *mandapa* supported by two massive pillars. Its empty sanctum is guarded by two *Dvarapalaks* carved more or less in an erect position.¹¹ The work of this temple seems to have been abandoned abruptly in the 7th century A.D. for reason not definitely known to us. However, scholars like K.R.Srinivasan and K.V.Soundarajan feel that its abrupt stoppage of work could be attributed to the sectarian animosity between brahmanical creeds and Jainas in 7th century A.D. Hence, no attempt was taken up to complete the temple even at a later period. Not far away from Chokkampatti on the road leading to Sankarankoil from Tenkasi lies the hamlet Malayadikuruchi. Having a rock-cut temple scooped out by a local chieftain Pandimangala Adirajan alias Eran Sattan at the instance Maran Sendan in his 17th year (617) of reign. Originally, it was Jaina foundation, but subsequently got converted into a Saiva shrine. Consequent to its conversion, it was remodelled to accommodate images of Brahmanical deities.¹²

It has been rightly pointed out by K.R.Srinivasan that its conversion to the Saiva faith was a sequel to religious antagonism between the Saivites and Jainas during the reign of Arikesari Parankusa.¹³ However, it was transformed into a full-fledged Saiva temple with elegant sculptures of Hindu deities in the early 9th century only. Whatever be case, in its originality, the Malayadikuruchchi temple could have been proud of being the earliest Jaina rock-cut in the Pandya region.

The twin hillock, locally known as Irattai porrai at Eruvadi, lying 7 km. north of Valliyur town in Tirunelveli district, has a cavern inhabited by Jaina monks in the 9th century A.D. Two medium size images of Adinatha and Mahavira were carved on the overhanging boulder of the ascetic-abode. These sacred were caused to be made by Ajjanandi during his itinerary to Eruvadi. Eruvadi ceased to be Jaina centre after the 10th century A.D. as Brahmanical religion gained currency then onwards. Temples dedicated to Siva as well as Visnu came to be built here in subsequent centuries. However, the Jaina cave remained unaltered till recently. Now, it is worshipped as a temple of Vaikunthaswamy by the local people.¹⁴

It is an insignificant village about 11km. from Koilpatti in Tuticorin district. A small boulder at the village contains a series of five miniature Tirthankara figures, below which are carved two bold reliefs of Adinatha and Mahavira in a niche.¹⁵

Kalugumalai, situated 16 km. west of Koilpatti, was the most important Jaina centre during the early Pandya regime. It was known as Tirunechchuram between 9th and 11th centuries A.D. The hillock on the northern side of this village was frequented by Jaina ascetics who at one stage inhabited four of its natural caverns. The one on the eastern side is the biggest and served as the abode of the principal monk. The whole length of the rock above this cavern was converted into a veritable gallery of exquisite diminutive sculptures of Tirthankaras in three rows, interspersed by bold reliefs of Adinatha, Neminatha, Mahavira, Parsvanatha, Bahubali, Ambika and Padmavati in specially cut niches. These bold reliefs are master pieces of the 9th century Pandya art, and were commissioned by ascetics and *sravakas* from different parts of Tamilnadu. The monastery of Kalugumalai was presided over by Gunasagaradeva and looked after by a host of his disciples.¹⁶ Being a great centre of religious learning, it attracted ascetics, nuns and lay followers from a number of villages like Kottaru, Kurandi, Tiruchcharanam, Kalakkudi, Nalkurkudi, Pidankudi, Karaikkudi, Alattur, Erahur Pereyirkudi, Ilavenbai etc.¹⁷ Kalugumalai continued to be a stronghold of Jainism till the end of the 10th or beginning of the 11th century

A.D., after which it began to disintegrate consequent to the rise of Saivism as well Chola occupation of the Pandya region.

Tirucharanattumalai otherwise known as Chitalar, 9 km. north east of Martandam in Kanyakumari district, became a centre of Jain importance in the 9th century A.D. The very name of the hillock would bear testimony to its association with Jain monks. There are three shrine-chambers accommodating images of Mahavira, Parsvanatha and *Yakshi* in the natural cavern of the hillock. Besides, three rows of miniature figures of Tirthankaras with bold reliefs of Ambika *Yakshi*, Neminatha, Parsvanatha and Mahavira at regular intervals are carved on the overhanging boulder of the cavern. Among the bold relief, the image of Ambika standing in *dhvibhanga* pose beside her lion mount and flanked by her sons and lady attendant, is an excellent specimen of early Pandya art. The mastery of the craftsman is elegantly portrayed in her slender form, attenuated hip, descending breasts and smiling countenance.¹⁸

Sculptures inside the cavern seem to have been commissioned during the reign of Ay Vikramaditya Varaguna, a vassal chief of the Pandyas, in the 9th century A.D. In the year 889 A.D., Muttuvola Narayanakuratti, a nun, endowed a perpetual lamp, a lamp-stand and a gold flower of 2 *kalanju* weight to the *Yakshi*. Another nun, Gunantangi Kuratti of Perreyirkudi made a gift of gold ornaments to be worn on the same *Yakshi* in 896 A.D. The special importance given to the worship of *Yakshis* in medieval times is illustrated by a number of lithic records and sculptures. Tirucharanattumalai continued to be a Jain centre, unlike others, till about the middle of the 13th century A.D.¹⁹ Thereafter, it became a place of Hindu worship. This is borne out by an inscription dated in 1250 A.D., mentioning one Narayanan Tamilappallavarayan of Kilavembanadu donated some money for the expenses of the Bhagavati temple of Tirucharanattumalai. Obviously, at that time, the image of *Yakshi* in the cave was provided with a plaster coating and transformed into Bhagavati. Still it happens to be a temple of Bhagavati and Hindu devotees from both Kerala and Tamilnadu offer worship on specific days. Although the *Yakshi* got metamorphosed into Bhagavati, other Jain images retain their original forms even at present.²⁰

Kottaru alias Nagercoil in Kanyakumari district was a Jain centre from about the 9th century A.D. to 16th century A.D. The present Nagaraja temple on the northern part of the town was originally a Jain structure, which after the 16th century came to be worshipped by Hindus as a sacred shrine of Serpent god and goddess.²¹

Although Nagercoil was a place of Jain importance in medieval times, Jain relics prior to the 16th century have not survived at this place. However, some 9th century lithic records from Kalugumalai in Tuticorin district refer to reputed Jain of Kottaru like Pushpanandi, Uttanandiagal, Vimalachandra, Santisena and Santisennapperiyadigal who had consecrated images of Tirthankaras at the Kalugumalai monastery.²²

The existence of the Jain temple at Nagercoil in the 12th Century is also attested to by some inscriptions from Puravaraseri Mid Kanyakumari.²³ Late medieval sculptures of Mahavira, Parsvanatha and Padmavati and some inscriptions of the 15th and 16th centuries found in the present temple, mentioning names of two Jain Panditas, Kamalvahana and Gunavira are indisputable evidence of its Jain affiliation and good state of preservation. Very likely, in the year 1588, it passed into the hands of the Hindus who began to worship it as the temple of Nagaraja (TiruAnantalvar) and Nagaramman (Consort of serpent king).²⁴

The advent of Pallavas in Tondaimandalam and Pandyas in the far south, their large scale building of Brahmanical temples, the *Bhakti* ideology popularized by Nayanmars and Alvars, their antagonistic approach towards heretical sects etc., led to a temporary decline of Jainism in the 7th century A.D. Among the Pandyas, Arikesari Parankusa, who then professed Jainism, was either converted or reconverted to Saivism by Gnanasambandar. In the sequel, the Chokkampatti temple remained unfinished while the one at Malaiyadi kuruchchi got converted into a Saiva shrine. Due to sectarian animosity, Jain adherents seem to have

migrated to other places from the Pandya capital. Absence of Jaina lithic records as well as literary works of the 7th century would subscribe to the above view. However, the period of its adversity did not last long and with in less than a century, it could see its resurrection. It was achieved patiently by accommodating iconic and ritualistic worship analogous to Brahmanism. *Yakshi* cult found a prominent place in Jaina pantheon and came to be held more or less on par with that of the Tirthankaras. As a result, Jainism became colourful and attractive, and could counterbalance the growth of Brahmanical religion. It was in this process of transformation, the earlier bare ascetic-resorts, besides the newly inhabited ones, metamorphosised into cave temples with exquisite portrayals of Tirthankaras and *Yakshis*. *Abhiseka*, *naivetya*, *aradhana*, special *pujas* etc. formed an integral part of the worship of these images. Provisions were made by lay devotees for the conduct of worship and the upkeep of monastic establishments.

The role of great *acharyas* and nuns in propagating Jaina doctrines and popularizing the worship of cult images had a tremendous effect in the growth of Jainism. Ajjanandi, Arishtanemi, Uttanandi, Gunasagaradeva and a host of others are held to be revivalist of Jainism in the Pandya region. During their itineraries to Jaina centres for religious propagation, they had also taken care to consecrate images of Tirthankaras and their attendant deities. The reason which impelled them to consecrate icons and encourage ritualistic worship was, no doubt, to gain more popularity among people and at the same time, to remove Brahmanical hatred against Jaina adherents.

Early Pandya rulers like Srimara Srivallabha and Parantaka Viranarayana were very tolerant and paid much importance to Jainism. Their rule witnessed the growth of Jaina institutions at Sittannavalai, Anaimalai, Aiyarmalai, Kalugumalai, Uttamapalayam and Eruvadi. Among the early Pandya Jaina centres, Kalugumalai emerged as the *hub of religious activities* in the 9th century A.D. attracting *Sramanas* and *Sravakas* from all over Tamilnadu. Structural temples of the early Pandya period seem to have existed at Nagercoil, Kulattur, Kayal and Nagalapuram. With the passage of time, their architectural members have disappeared completely, leaving bare the consecrated images to posterity.²⁵

The Chola subjugation of the Pandyas in the 10th century brought about adverse effects on Jainism also. The land of the Pandyas witnessed frequent wars and blood-sheds; as a result, it became uncongenial for further growth of Jainism. Moreover, the Cholas had not been so keen in lending support to Jainism in newly conquered Pandya region as they had done in their homeland as well as the already annexed Tondaimandalam. Subsequently, it resulted in the migration of Jaina population to Tondaimandalam where they could profess their religion peacefully thought any hindrance. Jainism thus began to disintegrate and, in course of time, disappeared from the land of the Pandyas.

CONCLUSION

Jainism and Buddhism wielded considerable influence in the Tamil country during the Post Sangam (Kalabhra) Period. The Institutionalisation of these religions with a well built ethical code and priestly order became a strong influence. This created a reaction in Saiva and Vaishnava sects resulting in the Bhakti Movement with a cadre of *Adiyars* and temples as the institutional base. The clash between these two (Jain/Buddhists and Saivites / Vaishnavites) resulted in a bitter struggle for power. The clash between these two led to two major developments such as the painful and tragic hatred and violent clashes and creative competition resulting in the development of literature, art, new forms of religious expression, new synthesis, etc.. As results, Jainism began to disintegrate and its peace loving adherents gradually migrated to Tondaimandalam. In fact expect for a few Jaina centres, others lost their pristine glory with the eclipse of the early Pandya power.

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