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JAINISM IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

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Abstract

There are various views regarding the spread of Jainism in Kanyakumari District. Among them the most accepted view is that Jainism entered into this District due to the changed mentality of the Mauryan ruler Chandra Gupta Maurya. He ruled South India in the 3rd century. He was an important ruler who patronised Jainism. He came to know about this religion through a Jain saint Badrabahu. He learnt Jain philosophy whole heartedly and was influenced by it in such a situation. There was famine in the Mauryan empire for about 12 years. The people were suffering from poverty and hungry. Chandragupta Maurya was unable to tackle the situation. He discussed the suffering of the people with the Jain Guru Bhadrabahu and sought his advice. Bhadrabahu advised Chandragupta Maurya to renounce the empire at the worldly life. He accepted his advice and he along with the Jain Monk Badrabahu and twelve thousand disciples marched towards Saravanabelgola near Mysore in Karnataka State. They settled there and propagated this religion. As a result of this Jainism spread in the entire South India including Kanyakumari District.

1. Introduction

The Sixth Century B.C. marked a significant event in the history of India. Jainism and Buddhism were considered as counter forces to Hinduism. Jainism and Buddhism are religious movements to purify Hinduism in terms of its practice. Vardhamana Mahavira founded a religion called Jainism [1]. He preached the people about the adverse impact of caste system and sectarianism.

There are various views regarding the spread of Jainism in Kanyakumari District. Among them, the most accepted view is that Jainism entered into this District due to the changed mentality of the Mauryan Ruler, Chandra Gupta

Mauya [2]. He ruled South India in the Third Century. He patronised Jainism. He came to know about this religion through a Jain Saint, Badrabahu [3]. He learnt Jain philosophy and was influenced by it. There was famine in the Mauryan Empire for about twelve years. The people were suffering from poverty and hungry. Chandragupta Maurya was unable to tackle the situation. He discussed the suffering of the people with the Jain Guru, Bhadrabahu and sought his advice. Bhadrabahu advised Chandragupta Maurya to renounce the worldly life. He accepted his advice, and he along with the Jain Monk, Badrabahu and twelve thousand disciples marched towards Saravanabelgola near Mysore in Karnataka State [4]. They settled there and propagated this religion. As a result, this Jainism spread in the entire South India including Kanyakumari District [5].

2. Jain Centres in Kanyakumari District

Practically the worship of foot print is so closely connected with Jainism that no other religion can claim its origin. The remnant of Adinath, the first Thirthankara who attained keval gnana is his foot print. According to Jains, it was not merely his foot- print worship in ancient Jain literature in Tamil [5]. At Valukkampaari and Kurandi in Kanyakumari District, the foot prints are worshipped. Monuments found in Kanyakumari District testify to the prevalence of Jainism in the area in the olden days. There is epigraphic evidence to show that there were flourishing Jain settlements in Kottar, Kurandi, Thirunandikkarai which are all in the present District of Kanyakumari [6].

Jainism flourished even before Seventh Century A.D. The Buddhists and Jains were roamed in the streets of Kottar. Kurattiyarai, Nagercoil, Chitharal, and Tirunandhikkarai. They were the main centers of Jainism in Kanyakumari District [7].

Like the Cave Temple of Kurathiyarai, the Jain Temple of Nagaraja Koil was also converted into a Vishnu Temple in the latter half of the Sixteenth Century A.D by the Venad Kings. Similarly, the Jaina Cave Temple in Tirunanadhikarai was converted into Siva Temple during the period of Raja Raja Chola-I [8].

2.1. Nagaraja Temple

The Nagaraja Temple in Nagercoil Town Kanyakumari District was once an important Jain centre. It is the ancestral town of Seventh Century. A.D. Nagercoil area was referred to as Kattaru.

An inscription in Kazhukumalai assignable to Nineteenth Century A.D states that the Jain monk Padamoolathan hailed from Kattaru. His disciple Shantisena commissioned the carving of the figures of the Tirthankara in Kazhugumalai [9].

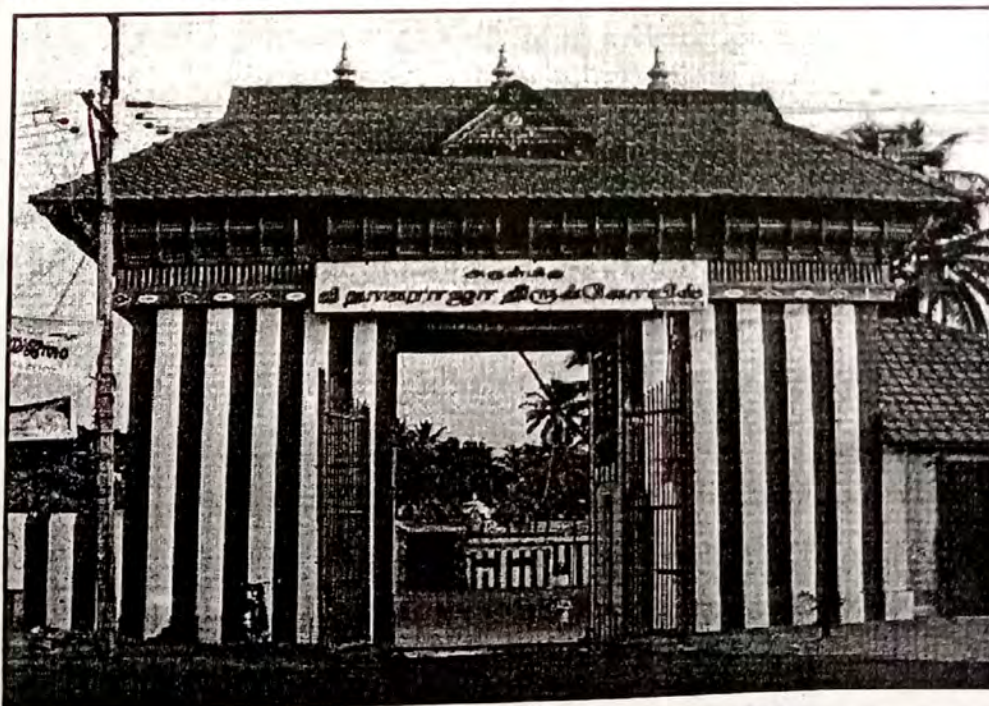
The Nagaraja Temple was actually a Jain Temple. It was converted as a Hindu Naga Temple after the time of the King Bhutalavira Marthanda Varma Maharaja.

Twenty years ago K.V. Soundarajan found six Jain images in worship in this Temple and two brass images of a later period depicting Parsvanatha and Yakshi Padmavati in standing posture [10]. The first author has seen four sculptures in his younger days. We could not trace the brass images and some sculptures despite the best efforts of the Archaeological Officer, Tirunelveli. The gateway to the Temple seen now is in typical Kerala style. It is called "Mahameru Malikai". But it has its connection with Jain mythology. According to Jain Mythology every Tirthankara at the time of his birth has to undergo the ceremony of Janma- Abhishika on the birth of a Tirthankara, Saudharma Indra with his wife reach the natal bed of the Tirthankara, pays his homage and takes the child to the peak of mount Mahameru with great pomp and festivity. There the child is bathed with celestial water as the first bathing. This mount is flanked by four celestial forests called Bhadrasala, Nandana, Saumanasa and Panduka and is surrounded on all four direction by Jaina Temples [11]. From the above description we may easily infer that the mandapa called maha-meru malikai in this Jain Temple should have been used in olden days, for the ritual of Jaina Janma Abhisheka [12].

The Jain sculptures of Parsvanatha and Tirthankaras found on the pillars in front of the Nagaraja shrine attest the fact that Jainism was there as late as 16-17th Century. Thirukottar District was a commercial centre of the

past. Ptolemy's geography and Pliny Travels clearly indicate that it was one of the most important cities at the beginning of the Christian era. The ancient city took its name Nagercoil from the five headed serpent shrine of Nagaraja which is situated in the heart of the present town. The serpent Shrine of Nagercoil, which is considered to be a Hindu Temple, was originally a Jain Temple [13].

Evidence of Jain origin of the Temple is seen in the inscriptions and sculptural images found in it. From the hymns of Thiruganasambandar, one of the four samayacharyas in the Seventh Century A.D, it can be surmised that Jainism was a prominent religion [14]. Cuimveera and Kamalavahana mentioned in the Temple inscriptions of the Sixteenth Century A.D are reminiscent of Jain nomenclature. The terms 'palli' and 'pallchanthan' inscribed there in are clear proof that it was not a Hindu Temple originally. The word 'palli' even today indicates Temple other than those of Hindus, 'pallichantham' means royal gift of lands to the deities of the religious while 'manyam' represent the gift made to Hindu Temple. One of the inscriptions found in the Temple passed into the hands of the Hindus at the time of its reconstruction and renovation in the year 696 M.E (1520 A.D) [15]. The Archaeologists to the Government of Kerala remark that the remnants of Jains are seen in the Temple vicinity.



Nagaraja Temple, Nagercoil

2.2. Thirunandikkarai

Thirunandikkarai, a village 17k.m from Kuzhithurai contains an ancient rock-cut cave Temple having an image of Siva and structural monument dedicated to the same God. There are epigraphical evidences to show that the rock-cut cave Temple was a Jain Temple up to Ninth Century A.D [16].

Monument found in different parts of Kanyakumari District testifies to the prevalence of Jainism in the olden days. There is epigraphic evidence to show that there were flourishing Jain settlement towns such as Kurandi, Thiruchcharanathumalai, Chitharal and Thirunandikkarai which are all in Kanyakumari. From the Jain vestiges and inscriptions found in Samanarmalai, Kalugumalai, and Thiruchcharanathumalai in the Districts of Madurai, Thoothukudi, and Kanyakumari, respectively, we learn that a large number of Jain monks who were there hailed from the above four places in Kanyakumari District [17]. The rock cut cave Temple at Thirunandikkarai is on the northern slope of the hill which lies east-west. It consists of a verandha with supporting pillars, one small chamber containing image of Linga and a rectangular hall in front of the sanctum sanctorum. Another Siva Temple on the southern side of the hill lower level and this structural Temple reflects Kerala art and architecture. The rock-cut cave Temple is purely of Jain origin. The Tranvancore Archaeological Department has officially recorded eleven inscriptions found at this place. The earliest of all records inscription belonging to the Ninth Century A.D. The line "*Thirunandikkarai Bhadar kudutha bhoomi*" which means the land assigned to the Temple at Thirunandikkarai was donated by the Bhadarar, is clear evidence that the land on which the structural Temple of Siva stands was obtained from the Jain monks. The word 'bhadarar' which denotes Jain monk is found frequently in the inscriptions in Thiruchcharanathumalai and Kalugumalai which happened to be famous Jain statements during the period of the Ninth Century A.D.

The inscription in the rock-cut cave Temple at Thirunandikkarai mentions the name of the Ay King Vikramaditya Varagunan and his activities. Probably Viranandi Adigal of Melapalli Temple at Thirunarungandai in the present Villupuram District who engraved a votive image at Thiruchcharanathumalai

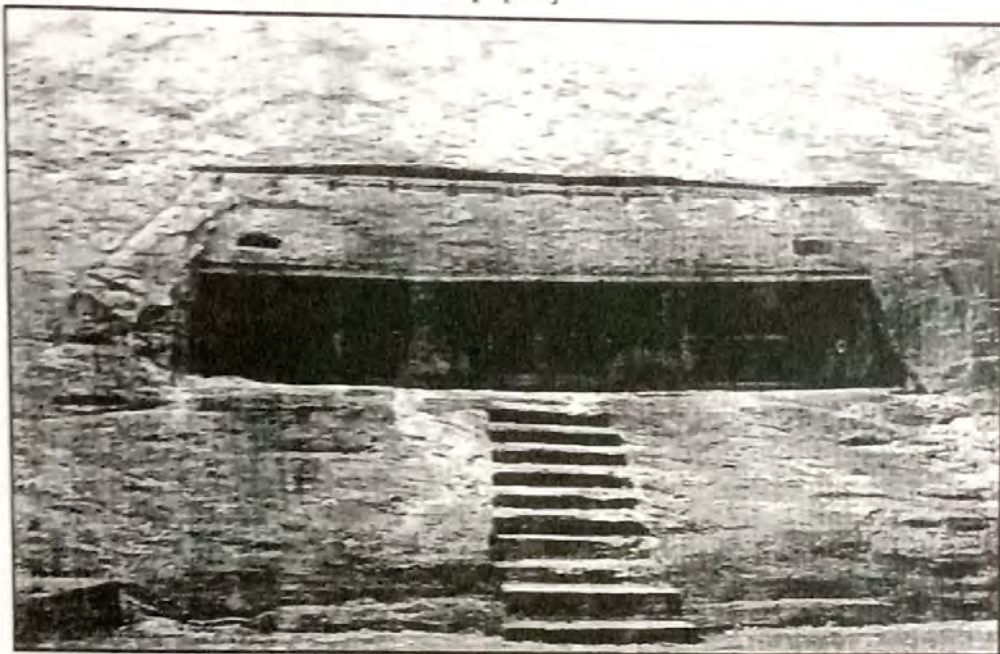
directed the hewing of the rock-cut cave Temple standing at a place nearly 10 km from Thirucharanthumalil [18]. Because of his stay at this place the river flowing in front of the hill came to be known as Nandiyar [19].

The Huzur Office Plate which belongs to the eighth regnal year (876 A.D) of King Varagunan of Ay Kingdom adds that a lady member of the Royal family of Ay dynasty named Murugansenthi embraced Jainism in the esteemed presence of one Jain monk most probably Veeranandi Adigal. King Varagunan dedicated her to the holy feet and donated some lands into the Temple in this connection. T.A. Gopinatha Rao who has edited, *Travancore Archaeological Series*, interpreted the word "Thiruvahdisaartha" as a marriage function [20]. Kavimony objected to it and have a new meaning. According to him the word "Thiruvahdisaartha" means to dedicate oneself to the almighty [21]. There is Temple evidence to show that "murugansenthi" was offered to the holy feet of Bhagavan by the King Vikramaditya Varagunan. Among the Jain ladies, the ancient custom of devoting oneself entirely to religious pursuits giving up marriage and family life exists even today. Jains celebrate this as a grand function which is called as "*deeksha kalyanom*". Similarly when Murugansenthi, a female member of the royal family of Ay dynasty dedicated herself to the service of Jain *Dharma*. The King Vikramaditya Varayanan offered her at the feet of *Adi Bhagavan* and some lands were also assigned to the Temple in commemoration of this function.

In Kanyakumari District one can see the foot print worship in Vazhukkamparai near Suchindrum, Sripaadaparai in the mid sea at Kanyakumari and Kurandi near Theroor [22]. The inscription on the eastern wall of the rock-cut-cave Temple which belongs to the 18th year of the Chola king Rajaraja. I (1003 A.D) record the grants to the Temple, for the celebration of a festival in Aippasi sathayam, the birthday of the King. It was also required that a perpetual lamp be kept before the image in the name of the King. This lamp was to be known as '*Rajaraja Thirunanda Vilakku*'.

During the period of Rajaraja Chola, the Cave Temple appears to have passed into the hands of the Hindus. The rock-cut cave Temple was originally

belonged to the Jains and was then converted into a Hindu shrine. During this period, the *peedam* containing the foot-prints was removed and an image of Sivalinga was installed. Recently, Kanyakumari Historical and Cultural Research Center has discovered that the *peedam* of foot prints in the Cave Temple which was enshrined in the cave Temple is also found on the top of the hill [23]. The temple is now so completely forgotten that people believe that this cave Temple was originally a Hindu place of worship [24].



Thirunanthikkurai Rock-Cut Temple

2.3. Cave Temple at Chitharal

Chitharal is a village situated about 4 miles to the north-west of Kuzhithurai, formerly the headquarters of Vilavancode Taluk in the southern division of Travancore. Near this village stands the small craggy hill called the Thirucharanathu *malai* [25]. On the top of it, there is a natural cave formed by an overhanging rock resting upon another. This cave has been improved by masonry work into a Temple [26].

In Kanyakumari District, Jain centres are established in different places like Chitharal, Thirunanthikkurai and Nagercoil. Among these, Chitharal appears to be the centre of Jainism in Kanyakumari District [27]. Chitharal Jain centre in Kanyakumari District appears to be the regional headquarters of

Jainism next to Seravanabelgola [28]. In 1977, a group of Dhigambara Jains from North India visited Chitharal [29]. The ancient Tamil literature such as *Naladiyar*, *Nanmanikadigai* and has references about the spreading of Jainism in Tamil Nadu.[30] These literary works reveal that Jainism has flourished in Chitharal, Thirunanthikkurai and Nagercoil [31].

The Archeological Department has taken care to preserve some of the records of the site at Chitharal. Travancore Archeological Series contain some information regarding this ancient Jain Temple at Chitharal [31]. The Jain Vihara, the religious school along with the University that existed in the suburbs of Chitharal is even known to the Chinese. So it is said that its antiquity is much earlier. The Temple faces west and stands on a rock. In front of the Temple there is a *mandapa*, the *verandah*, the *Balipida* and the kitchen. On the overhanging rock are curved in half despite where a number of fingers of the Thiruthankaras and of the Goddess Padmavathi Devi. The most important image is 'Muni'. 'Muni' faces west and is sitting in a posture called 'Padmasana' on an elevated stone plinth quite naked having a raft on hair. Jain figures are present in the *gopura* [32].



Chitharal Jain Temple

2.4. Rock-cut Cave Temple at Kurathiyarai

The village Kurathiyarai is situated 19 kms north of Nagercoil in the road leading to Kadukkarai near Azhakiapandipuram in Thovalai Taluk, Kanyakumari District. A uni-cellar cave-Temple is situated on the Kuravan Thattupparai, which is also known as Chenthipparai. The survey record mentions the hillock in which the cave Temple is situated as Anjugiri. It is carved in at 3 feet depth and 6 feet height forming a unicellar measuring 5'3" x 4'1" with walls of irregular shape. An incomplete, bas-relief structure of Vishnu was scooped-out in the cave [33]. About 600 feet in front of the cave, an inscription in *Vatteluthu* characters engraved on a rock is seen in Kuravanthattupparai. It belongs to Tenth Century A.D. of the Later Chola period of Parantaka I [34]. The inscription refers to the 31st regnal year and the title of the king "Kopparakesari" without mentioning the name of the king and the year. Two more inscriptions found mentioning only the regnal year and the title of Kopparakesari in Guhanatheeswarar Temple in Kanyakumari and Thanumalaya Swami Temple in Suchindrum. The inscription records a gift of 'pon' to the seated Vishnu and also the remittance of seven *pon* as enhancement of tax by one 'Ippik Kavisigyan Sathan Sravanan of Kuntrapalli' to Sree Vaishnavan of that village [35].

The Kazhugumalai Inscription in Tuticorin District records a gift of two 'Tirumenies' by the Thiruchranattu Kurattikal to the Kottumattu Pemparrur Palli [35]. The place name mentioned in the inscription is as 'Munoor Rivavi Niyamam'. 'Niyamam' means 'merchant guild'. Kurathiyarai rock inscription mentions the gift of *pon* made to 'Veetrintharulina Emperuman', i.e., the seated Vishnu. Now, this stone sculpture seated Vishnu is seen in damaged condition at a distance of about 30 feet from the rock edict [36]. Like the cave Temple at Kurathiyarai, the Jain Temple of Nagercoil was also converted into a Vishnu Temple in the latter half of the Sixteenth Century AD by the Venad Kings. Similarly the Jain cave Temple at Thirunanthikkurai was converted into Siva Temple during the period of Raja Raja Chola I. Chitharal Jain Temple is found on the depiction given in the Manasara. The cropped head, hanging ear lobes, the complete nakedness of the figures, the meditative mood, the yogic *padmasana* posture, the *simhasana* with the figures of Chauri bearing Yakshas and Vidyadharas and the other devotees are all praiseworthy [37].

The inscription is engraved on a rock on the south of the Temple. It is written in *Vatteluthu* [38] characters are in Tamil language. Another inscription is on a pavement stone in front of *pagoda*. They are in *Koleluthu* or *Vatteluthu* characters that are in the old Malayalam-Tamil [39]. A stone pillar about three feet tall above the ground is installed nearby the rock cut inscription. Inscriptions are made on the four sides of the stone pillar. Apart from these, the inscriptions found in this Temple refer to numerous women Jain ascetics which clearly explain the Jain religious activities of this Temple [40]. At present, the Temple is being used by the Hindus. They believe that the Temple is a Bhagavathi Temple. It appears that the Temple has been converted into a Bhagavathi Temple before 1250 A.D. The Tantri of the *pagoda* is a Nambiyar, but the Potti performs the poojas as the Nambiyar's deputy. The Temple is called Bhagavathi koil [41].

3. The Jain Festivals

The major festivals of the Jains are related to the auspicious occasions of the life of great masters of Jainism. These occasions are (i) descent in the mother's womb (*garbhadharana*, *cyavana*) (ii) birth (*Janma*) (iii) renunciation (*diksa*) and (iv) attainment of omniscience (*kevalajnanna*) and (v) death and final emancipation of Jina Pajjusana is the most popular festival of the Jain. It is performed in the month of Bhadrapad (August-September) with the aim of purification by forgiving and rendering service with whole hearted effort and devotion. In the last day of this festival, they join and distribute alms to the poor and take out a procession with the image of Mahavira. During the festival, annual confession is made to remove all their ill-feelings. A fasting ceremony known as *oli* is observed nine days each during the month of Chitra (March-April) and Ashwin (September-October). In the Diwali day, the Jains celebrate *nirvana* of Mahavir by lighting lamps. The *jean Panhuman*, five days after the Diwali is celebrated by the Jain with temple worship and especially with worship of scriptures in manuscript form in the full-moon night of the month chitra the Jains celebrate Mahavir Jayanti, the birthday of Mahavira. It is significant that in common with the Hindus, the Jains celebrate many of the Hindu festivals like

Koli, Makara-Sankranti, Navaratri (in north) *pongal, Kartika, and Yugadi* (in south). The Jains take part in Temple worship and worship is an obligatory rite to them. They worship not only the image Mohair, but also of all liberated souls, monks and the scriptures in various occasions. Chanting of hymns, consecration of images and shrines are parts of Jain rituals. All these show the reflection of Hindu influence of Jainism. It is significant that it only the *Svetambaras* decorate the tremolo idol with clothings and Ornaments. The *Digambara* authors put more emphasis on mental culture than on idol worship.

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