

A FRESH LOOK ON JAINISM IN KERALA

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Abstract

The influence of religion in Kerala society is a very elaborate and interesting chapter in its History. From the ancient period, Kerala is the meeting ground of all the Indian religions and philosophy. Besides Jainism and Buddhism, some world religions like Christianity, Islam and Judaism also got safe asylums in our soil. The important literary works like Silappadikaram, Akanannuru, and Purannanuru which were included in the Sangam works and *Śuka Sandeśa* and *Koka Sandeśa* included in the *Sandేశakāvya* contain the relics and antiquity of Jainism. The inscriptions, temple relics, architecture of buildings, placing of idols in temples, prove the existence of Jainism in Kerala. The religion reached its zenith in the early centuries of Christian era. This article reviews history of Jainism in Kerala.

Key words : *Sangam, kāvyas, inscriptions, Piyadasi, Nāga, Tantra, Kavū*

Analysis of the sources

Both primary and secondary sources are used for the study of Jainism in Kerala. An ancient religious subject like Jainism is historically difficult to reconstruct. The monuments and the evidence on them, help a researcher to reconstruct the life and culture of Jainism in Kerala. Many historians jumped in to the depth of History and found out the value of doing research on the subject of Jainism.

Scope and relevance of Study

Jainism and Jain principles are still followed by innumerable number of people. The emergence and the growth of Jainism is an interesting chapter in Kerala History. Many unique principles and ideas were the contribution of Jainism. It changed the way of life and brought changes in the society also. The Jain principles and way of life are still continued by several people at a time when the fellow religions like Buddhism disappeared from the land of its origin.

Introduction

Jainism was founded by Vartamāna Mahāvira, in the sixth century BC. It reached in Kerala in the third century B.C. Chandra Gupta Maurya, the founder of Mauryan Dynasty, accepted Jainism at the influence of Bhadrabāhu. He appointed his son Bindusāra as the next king and abdicated the throne. Accompanied by Bhadrabāhu, Chandra Gupta Maurya reached Sravanabelgola near Mysore. There he starved himself to death by following the precepts of the religion. Though Chandragupta reached up to Sravanabelgola, his followers reached Kerala. Different views and opinions are expressed by historians regarding the coming and spread of Jainism in Kerala. One of the important arguments is that the followers of Bhadrabāhu reached Kerala.¹

The Girnar inscription says that Keralaputras, Satyaputras, Cholas and Cheras were sharing boundaries with Asoka Kingdom. It might be possible that Jainism spread during the same time in Kerala. The Archaeological evidence discovered from different parts also confirm this view. Through the influence of Jain followers, the people of Kerala accepted Jainism. Kerala is one of the countries mentioned in the first edit of Asoka.² It was exclusiveness of the orthodox Nambutiris and their sustained endeavour to keep the fundamental truths of the brahmanical faith

under the cover of mystery that alienated the people from Hinduism and persuaded them to accept the tenets of Jainism.

The Jain remains are seen in Thirucharanam in Kuzhithurai area of Nagercoil in south Travancore. They are also seen in places like Kilirur, Neelumperur, in Kottayam district, Perumbavoor Kallil cave temple in Erunakulam district, Alathoor, Kongad in Palakad district, Panamaram, Kalpatta, Pulpalli in Wayanad district.³ Many prominent Hindu temples of today are ancient Jain shrines. Jainism is the religion of our country, and a good number of temples belong to this sect.⁴ The Jain shrines were converted into Hindu temples in this transformation. Matilakam was also a centre of Jainism in ancient Kerala. Matilakam is located in the Cherthalataluk of Alapuzha district.⁵ Mathilakam or Thrikannamatilakam is famous during the period of Perumals.⁶ Here, till recently, Brahmins did not enter the shrine. Thrikannamatilakam, which is near to it, is not only a cultural centre but also a thriving market place. Jain Merchants reached here through Palaghat. Important places like this were located near many Jain temples and Jain Sangethams.⁷ This is mentioned in the Malayalam work Kokasandesham.

The Kudal Manikyam temple at Iringalikuda near Thrissur, in North Kerala was once a Jain temple. Iringalakkuda is one among the 64 Nambutiri villages and is mentioned in Kerala records.⁸ The image of the temple is that of Barat, the brother of Sri Rama. But some historians express the view that the image installed inside the Kudalmanikam temple is that of Bharadesvara, a digambara, and not that of Bharata. There appears to be some truth in this assumption as this area was a stronghold of Jainism in the olden days.⁹ Kallil near Perumbavur has an old Jain shrine. The inner side of the temple is a natural rock-cut cave. The images installed inside the temple are that of Pārśvanāth, Mahāvīra and Padmāvatīdevī. Now it is a Bhagavatī temple. The Poojas are conducted by Naboothiri Brahmins. Ganavathy Vattom of Sulthan Batherry at Wayanadis also a centre of Jainism in Kerala. In the Edakkal caves

near Sulthan Batherry also there are a number of Jain inscriptions. The name 'Edakkal' literally means 'a stone in between, and this describes how the cave is formed by a heavy boulder standing in the fissure of a rock.¹⁰ It is the most important cave in south India in Ambukuthy Mala discovered by Fred-Fawcett in 1890. The Bhagavatī temple located on the top of the hills is also believed to be one of the earliest Jain Shrines. Apart from these Jain temples in Kerala, there is a Jain temple at Thirucharanattu Malai in Chitharal village of Kannyakumari district. The surviving monument is also a part of study in the history of Kerala. The images installed inside the temple are that of Pārśvanāth, Mahāvīra and Padmāvatidevī. In the 4th century the temple was converted into a Bhagavatī temple. The Bhagavati temple there seems to be a place of Jain worship even as late as the 13th century.¹¹ Vikramaditya Varaguna, the Ay king, gave gifts to this temple. Nagercoil, where this temple is situated, is also famous for the Nāgarāja temple.¹² The Nāgarāja temple at Nagercoil was also a Jain temple. The image of Parswanath was converted to Anantakrishna. In 1522 the Venad King, Bhuthala Vir Udaya Marthadan donated wealth to this temple.¹³ He donated lands and images for Nagar and Nagaraja in the temple. Later the lands were left in the custody of Kerala Narayanan, Gunavirapandita and Jivakarudaiyan Kamalavahana Pandita, who were supervising the temple affairs.¹⁴ An old Jain temple ruins were also found at Alathooraluk in Palakkad district. In Kasarcode district also there are Jain shrines which fulfilled the spiritual needs of the natives.

Jains seem to have made very little impression on the people. Even regard for animal life, which is the greatest characteristics of the Jains, had little hold on the people. Now the great bulk of Hindu population eat fish and flesh, when they get it and it is the Brahmins who keep away from this habit in the present time.¹⁵

Decline of Jainism

The existence of these Jain relics in Kerala furnishes the proof that Jainism had great influence on the people. But there are many reasons which led to the decline of Jainism in Kerala. The rise of Saivism and Vaisnavism in the 8th century led to the decline of Jainism in Kerala. Sankarāchārya and Advaita cult also pushed back the growth of Jainism. The Bhakti movement also created huddles to the growth of Jainism. Huan-Tsang, the Chinese Traveller who visited India in the 7th century noticed that Jainism was in a stage of decline.¹⁶ Moreover, the secluded life of Jain monks and vegetarianism led to little acceptance of this religion in Kerala community. The lack of spirit to spread the principles of Jainism in Kerala by the followers also led the decay of the religion. The growth of Christianity and Islam also led to the neglect of Jainism by the people. The existing taboos and beliefs also did not allow majority of the people to follow the Jain principles. So it did not flourish like that of other religions. The monks and followers who had done commendable service for the progress of their religion were succeeded by lazy and pleasure loving priests in the later years who alienated the religion from the common people.

Impact of Jainism

Jainism left only very little impact on the life and culture of Kerala. In the ancient period many customs and systems existed in Kerala. Among these religious denominations Jainism keeps its own identity. Illago Adikal, the Sangam poet, and the author of *Silappadikaram* reveals that, in a family Hindus, Buddhists, Jainlived together and they engaged in marriage relations.¹⁷ The Jains fasted unto death and this custom was called *Vadakerikal*. This custom was practised till modern times and can be reckoned as one of the debris of Jainism in Kerala. Udayan Cheral, the Venad king followed *Vadakerikal*.¹⁸ The important terms like *Pallipadu*, *Nalajiar*,

Pacha Parameshtical exist in daily usage as a result of the prevalence of Jainism in Kerala.¹⁹

The Jain culture is seen in the architecture of the temples and mosques of Malabar. Some of the temples and mosques in Malabar were constructed with the amalgamation of Jain architecture. The texts like *Vastu*, *Āgma*, and *Tantra* which existed in the late medieval period reveal the architectural style and the ritual elements of many ancient traditions of Jainism.²⁰ Nāga worship in Kerala is one of the most important religious beliefs which came into existence as a result of the influence of Jainism. In relation with Naga worship, *Kavus* or sacred groves and it's worship also started in the entire Kerala. The worship of Parshanatand Padmāvati was transformed into the worship o Nāgarāja and Naga queen in these sacred groves.²¹

Conclusion

Jainism and Jain principles inspired the people of Kerala for a very long time. Though it did not originate in Kerala, it had strong influence in the life and culture of Kerala. It influenced not only the minds of people but also the culture of the land. The remains of Jainism are seen through the monuments scattered in different parts of Kerala. This indirectly tells us the spread and development of Jainism in this land.

Notes :

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- ⁶ M. R. Raghava, Varier and Rajan, Gurukul, *Kerala Charithram*, (Mal), Vallathol Vidyapeetham, Edapal, 2011, p. 181
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- ¹⁷ R. NarayanaPannikar, *Adi Kerala Charithram*, (Mal), V. V. Book Depo, Kollam, 1911, pp. 11-12
- ¹⁸ S.K. Vasanthan, *Nammal Nadannavazhikal -Kerala Samskara Charithram*, (Mal), Malayalapadana Gaveshna Kendram, Thrissur, 2006, p. 36
- ¹⁹ *Pallipadu - temple wealth, Nalajiar -the guru of Jain vihara, Pachaparameshhtical - Acharyan or Upadhiyan*

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²¹ Aju, Narayanan, *Keralathila Budhamathaparamparyam Nattarivukallilude*, (Mal), Anugraha Kottayam, 2005, p. 30

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