Jaina Traces at Eswarankod in Palakkad, Kerala

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Abstract: *Identification of Jaina images in one of the strongholds of Jainism in Kerala – Eswaramkod— has not been so easy. Scholars who wrote on the two images spoke of them merely as representative of the concept of Tirthankara rather than being any of the particular Tirthankaras of Jaina pantheon. Although, historians have accepted the fact that the Eswarankod images take us back to an early medieval past, it was not possible for them to say much about the identity of the images merely because much less effort has been made to compare them with some other models found elsewhere. Also, there were fewer efforts to look into the iconographic aspects of the Jaina images found in the state. This has resulted in historians following some observations made by established authorities. Archaeological investigations lead to some accidental discoveries which again throw light upon a hidden past. Three years ago, the present author could find three front-facing lion figures on the pedestal of one of the images and establish it clearly as that of Mahavira Tirthankara. A detailed documentation of the two images and the associated aspects of early medieval Jaina iconography reflected in them was made subsequently. Still, much is left to be taken up by subsequent scholars.*

Keywords: Palghat Gap, Kongu Lands, Eswarankod, Kottam, Mukkuda, Lanchanas, Pindikkadavul

Introduction

The history of Jainism and its iconography indicate some important trends. One is the pace with which the religious tradition reached every nook and corner of the country immediately after its origin. Yet another aspect is its distinct identity in comparison with Brahmanism though *Puranic Hinduism* had been a powerful influence on the mythology, rituals and iconography of Jainism in the later stage. Jainism was a religion of the masses. That explains how it spread to Palakkad district in Kerala. Eswarankod, about 15 kms to the west of the Palakkad town and close to the Kalladikkodan hills, was a centre of Jainism in the early medieval period. The culture of the Jains involved many aspects including the cultivation of practices such as worship at shrines, monasteries housing monks and nuns and rigorous religious observances such as death by *samadhi* (Saletore 1932). Epigraphs have been found on the pedestals of the images in some parts of the south. Inscriptions were engraved on the pillow side of the stone beds in the caverns in the hills. (Desai 1957). No such inscriptions could be found

at Eswarankod. This study, therefore, attempts a detailed description of sculptural features of the two images.

Previous Studies

The first notable historian who mentioned about the Jaina images was Dr M R Raghava Varier who in an article titled *Madhyakalarambhattile Keraleeya Jaina Kendrangal* (Jaina centres of early medieval Kerala), identified one of the images as that of *Pindikkadavul*. (Varier 1992). He has repeated the same in a book titled *Jainamatam Kerattil*. Varier has not said anything about the other image. (Varier 2011). In her doctoral thesis titled *Jain-Buddhist centres in the early history of Kerala* (1995), Padmakumari Amma doubted whether the *Pindikkadavul* image could be that of Aranatha or Mallinatha. (Amma 1995). She had noticed the second image and considered the possibility of it being that of Mahavira. However, she had not found the symbols usually associated with the idol of Mahavira. So, she was not certain about the image being that of Mahavira. She has also dated the images to the 9th-10th centuries A.D. (Amma 1995).

In a paper titled *Jaina Heritage of Palakkad, t*he present author had in 2007 tried to connect the images to the possibility of Mundur being one of the earliest centres of Jainism in the district. He had cited a 1939 article by Vijaya Chandra Jain to say that there were Jains in Mundur (Rajan 2007). Innes, the author of *Malabar Gazetteer*, had stated that in the wake of the invasion of Tipu Sultan, the Jains from Jainamedu had fled to Mundur. There is, however, no way for substantiating whether Mundur and the sites such as Eswaramkod had been centres where the Jains had lived from the early medieval period onwards.

In a recent paper titled *Visualizing Yakshi in the Religious History of Kerala*, Sandhya M Unnikrishnan (2017) has hinted at the Eswaramkod site having the images of Tirthankaras, Yakshas and Yakshis. However, the author has committed serious factual errors in saying so. The attendant figures mentioned could not be found at the site. It is true that scholars who worked on Kerala's Jaina tradition had not gone deeper into the iconographic features. They simply relied on some earlier authorities. The present study has drawn heavily on secondary works which dealt with Jaina iconography. Texts such as Manasara were also consulted. The two texts from which the author gathered much information on Jaina iconography are *The Jaina Iconography* by Bhattacharya (1939; Reprint 1974) and *Iconography of The Jain Images in the Government Museum Chennai (Madras)* by Kannan and Narayanan (2001).

Eswaramkod a Centre of *Kottam?*

Historians differ on the exact meaning of the term *kottam*. Some took it as a term to mean a temple in a general sense. The place name Eswaramkod reminds us of the term *kottam*. Ilanko Adikal, the author of the epic Silappadikaram, opens his work saying he was told by the hill-Kuravas about the miraculous incident involving a chaste lady while he was residing in *Kunavayirkottam*. Narayanan (1972) had tried to connect the Kunavayir kottam to Trikkanamathilakam near Mahodayapuram. However,

architectural evidences for the theory could not be brought out. Varier and Gurukkal (1999) have also not given much weight to this assumption.

The term *kottam* is taken to mean a Jain shrine. Champakalakshmi (2012), for example, refers to the existence of `a *Niganta Kottam* or Jain shrine in Puhar'. In Silappadikaram, the term *kottam* is used in the sense of a temple. This is indicated by the use of terms such as *velyanaikkottam* (Airavata temple), *vellainagarkottam* (temple of Balarama), *verkottam* (temple of Muruga), *niggantakkottam* (Jaina temple) etc. Silappadikaram also refers to *Pattinikottam*, that had existed in the Chera land. *Chakyar thottam* was the name given to the site of Jaina temple ruins at Godapuram in Altattur taluk in Palakkad. Raghava Varier took the term to mean *Chakkaiyar Thottam* (Varier 2011). In fact, it could have been *Chakaiyar Kottam*. The hill is also known as *Pallikkunnu* (Varier 2011). Desai describes the term *Palli* as the term for `hermitages or monasteries or temples or even educational institutions.' (Desai 1957) In many Jain centres in the south, temples and monasteries (*viharas*) had existed. At Eswaramkod, we do not have evidence of a structural temple or a rock-cut cave temple other than two Jaina images. Still, we have to assume the presence of a shrine at this site because of the fact that a thousand years period is too long for much to be lost. Stylistic features of the two Jaina idols at the site indicate an earlier date.

Trading Groups and Jaina Shrines on Trade Routes

Eswarankod is along the trade route connecting the Palakkad gap to Kozhikode (Calicut). Interior centres of exchange and trade routes along the gap region must have helped in the spread of Jainism in Kerala from the early historic period onwards. Most probably, the Jain monks had come from nearby areas where Jainism had been well established long back. Palani and other areas in neighbouring Tamil Nadu must have given an impetus to the penetration of the Jains into the plains of Palakkad. The early Brahmin inscriptions found in known Jain centres close to the Palghat gap hint at the popularity of the faith among the merchants and craftsmen (Chamapakalakshmi 2012). They allude to the presence of Jain monks in these areas (Chamapakalakshmi 2012). In Tamizhakam, which included Palakkad, Jainism was very active. From the 7th century A.D onwards, the faith had faced some adverse circumstances on account of the spread of Bhakti ideology supported by Brahmanical polities threatening its existence as an ideological force (Champakalakshmi 2012). During this period, Jainism had faced opposition from the Buddhists as well (Saletore 1943).

Inscriptional data show that Jainism had received patronage from the Cheras of Mahodayapuram. Jain trading community had maintained shrines in centres such as Alattur, which is also on the trade route linking the Kongu lands to Kodungallur (Narayanan 1972). The Alattur inscription mentions the names of the trading groups, *Nalppettennayiravar* and *Valanchiyar* (Narayanan 1972). It also confirms the fact that at least till the 12th century A.D, Jain establishments in Kerala had enjoyed the patronage of the state and traders. The inscriptions compare the violation of the terms of the grant of lands to the Alattur (Kavasseri) shrine with the acts of insulting the Jain preceptors

as well as killing seers, Brahmans and cows. The trading community, affiliated to Jainism, had already accepted the *Dharmasastra* ideals which prohibited acts against the Brahmans and cows (Varier 2011).

Mahavira Image

The Jaina tradition of Kerala is reconstructed largely based on a few and thinner evidences. With out archaeological evidences like idols or relics of the earlier structural shrines, we would not have been in a position to claim that the state too had a Jaina tradition. As Saletore (9143) stated, it was the Tirthankara images that `kept alive the faith of Jainism' in the south. They represent a later tradition in Jaina iconography. The Jaina faith was divided into Digambara and Svetambara sects in the 3rd century A.D. It was the Digambara sect that became popular in the south throughout. There was also the influence of the Yapaniya sect which combined features of Digambara and Svetambara sects. The early Jaina images of Mathura, belonging to the Kushan period, lacked lanchhana or specific symbol which distinguishes and differentiates the various Tirthankaras from one another (Bhattacharya 1974). The Tirthankara images bear features outlined in the texts on the carving of the deities of the Jaina pantheon. Carving of Jaina images goes back to the Maurya and Sunga periods (Majumdar and Pusalkar 1990). Jaina iconography is based on texts like *Achara Dinakara, Uttaradhyayana Sutra, Abhidhana-chintamani (*Majundar and Pusalkar 1990*)* and *Manasara*. In the early period, animals peculiar to each Tirthankara had not been carved in the north. Depiction of the Jaina Tirthankaras according to the symbols, myths, and legends of the sects within Jainism started in the Gupta period (Majumdar and Pusalkar 1989). The south Indian Jaina images reached their creative climax in the 10th century (Majumdar and Pusalkar 1989).

Relief sculptures of Jaina Tirthankaras have not been found in Palakkad district. The sites such as Chitral, Kallil, etc are also known for relief sculptures of the Jaina images. The independent sculptures in centres such as Alattur, Paruvasseri, and Eswaramkod show their links with the period of the rise of structural temples. The epigraphs from sites such as Thiruvannur, Kinalur (both in Kozhikode district) and Alattur (Palakkad district) indicate that Jaina religious establishments were given lands for the conduct of rituals (Narayanan 1972). Such details are not available in the case of Eswarankod.

Gopinatha Rao (1908) had found three seated images of Mahavira at a Naga temple in Nagarcoil town, which was formerly part of the earstwhile Travancore state. Among them, one was carved on a pillar `in the mandapa in front of the central shrine.' Two were in the central shrine. One major criterion which Rao (1908) used to identify the three images as Mahavira was the presence of what he called *simha lanchchhana* or lion totem `seen below the *simhasana*'. At Kallil near Perumpavoor also, he had found an unfinished carving of the image of Mahavira in a *yogasana* pose. Only one figure of lion could be found in the middle of the seat. Yet another trait Rao found in Mahavira images of Kerala was triple umbrella above the head (Rao 1908). H Sarkar also noted the Mahavira image in *sattva paryanka* pose. In a detailed work on the temple

architecture of Kerala, Sarkar had also cited the instance of a Mahavira image in the 9th century Jain shrine at Chitral with features such as `chhatratrayi, chaitya-tree, and two attendants.' (Sarkar 1978). At Alattur, dated to the 10th-11th centuries, `three front-facing lions in between the cross-bars on the pedestal' were found. It is this type of lanchhana that we find on the pedestal of the second image of Tirthankara at Eswaramkod.

That may indicate that the idol was that of Mahavira. The studies, though few, have so far been unable to establish the image as Mahavira as its pedestal was placed below the surface. Three years ago, the present author could examine the pedestal below the surface and find three front-facing lions (Figure 1). Though Padmakumari Amma (1995) had suspected the Tirthankara image to be representing Mahavira, her conclusion was based on the two lion figures found on either side of the back rest. She was aware of the fact that the lions on the sides can not be the sole evidence for the image to be identified as Mahavira. She felt that the lion figures are not found at the place where the Tirthankara's lanchhana is normally placed. The face of one of the lion figures is in a mutilated condition. In the early medieval idols, lion is depicted in the pedestal bearing the image of Mahavira and on both sides of the backrest. In the later period, i.e., from the 16th century, yali (lion) image was carved above the *Parabhavali* around the Tirthankara images.



Figure 1: Three Front-facing Lions on the Pedestal bearing the Mahavira Image

The general features of Jaina idols -- triple umbrella (*mukkuda*), long ear lobes, complete nudity, long arms, meditative pose, *chauri* (flywhisk)-bearing attendants, etc – are found in both the images at Eswarankod. The *Tirthankaras* are sitting cross-legged with the right and left hands placed upwards over the face as per the instructions in

Manasara (Acharya 2011). The size of the idols is also small. The Mahavira Tirthankara at Eswarankod has a semi-circular *prabhavali*. In addition to these is a cylindrical cushion between the back of the image and the back rest. The back rest is ornamented. The sitting posture is *ardha-paryankasana* (the posture used in sitting on the ground normally in south India in *dhyana* pose) (Kannan and Lakshminarayanan 2001). The left leg is placed below the right thigh while the right leg rests on the left thigh.

The legs are not fully crossed. The Thrithankaras such as Adinatha, Mahavira and Neminatha are said to have earned *nirvana* while sitting in meditation (Kannan and Lakshminarayanan 2001). The palms of both hands are not visible though it is possible for us to know that the right hand is placed on the left. Unlike in the Chola idols of the 9th-10th centuries, the *prabhavali* in the Eswaramkod image does not have flames on its outer rim. Perhaps, the image bears the influence of the local styles. The face of the Tirthankara is mutilated. The Tirthankara idol's total height is 20 cm (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Mahavira Image

Pindikkadavul Image

It is the tree symbol (vriksha) which has been cited to identify the first image by scholars such as Varier. Tree symbol is prominently carved above the triple umbrella of the image (Figure 3). The foliage is in a deteriorated state. As in the case of Mahavira image, it has also a cushion between the back of its body and the back rest. In many

other parts of the south, images without specific *lanchanas* though with features such as triple umbrella and attendant figures, have been found. The usual practice is to categorise them as Tirthankara (Kannan and Lakshminarayanan 2001). Tree symbol is carved above the triple umbrella of Mahavira in other parts. According to Jaina belief, Mahavira attained *kevala-jnana* while sitting under the branches of a *Sala* tree (Kannan and Lakshminarayanan 2001). As compared to the image of the Mahavira, the facial features in this image are visible and indicate a meditative pose. The eyes, eye brows, nose and mouth are not clear. Part of its left hand upto the knee is mutilated. The body is well-shaped. The head of the idol is completely shaven and is not ornamented. Its total height is 20 cm as in the case of Mahavira figure.



Figure 3: Tirthankara with Triple Umbrella and Tree Symbol

The idol is characterized as *Pindikkadavul* by Varier (1976). He has based his conclusion on the references to such a deity in the work of P B Desai. Padmakumari Amma's (1995) inference, based on the tree symbol carved above the triple umbrella over the head, was that the idol may be representing the Tirthankaras Aranatha or Mallinatha. The idea of *Pindikkadavul* was borrowed by Varier from the observations made by P B Desai in another context. In his work titled *Jainism in South India*, Desai refers to "the grant of village Panappadi by the subordinate chief Siddhavadavan for the worship of the Jaina deity Pindikkadavul consecrated on the hill and for the maintenance of the ascetics engaged in austerities' (Desai 1957). In this, there is no reference to the

iconographic features of *Pindikkadavul*. It is Desai (1957) who remarks that the literal meaning of *Pindikkadavul* is `the god of the Asoka tree' and therefore the term refers to the Jina in general. According to him, it has no`specific reference to any Tirthankara in particular'. Desai also explains the terms Pindi and Pindiyan as meaning `the Asoka tree' and `the Arhat' respectively. Desai (1957) said:

Here we should not construe the Asoka tree as the specific Kevala tree or Chaitya-druma of a particular Tirthankara (e.g., Mallinatha). All the Tirthankaras are distinguished in a general way by virtue of their supernatural characteristics such as the Asoka tree, Dharma Chakra, flywhisks, lion seat etc… The Jainas of the Tamil country seem to have been particularly fond of emphasising the emblem of the Jina. References to the Jaina divinity in association with the Asoka tree figures as one of the prominent symbols in the depiction of Adi Jinendra in the Chavundarayapurana, a Kannada work of the 10th century A.D.

Although Desai himself has made it clear that the figure with Asoka tree need not be taken as representing Mallinatha, Padmakumari Amma considers it so. Also, she posits the possibility of the image being Aranatha as well (Amma 1995). At this stage, nothing specific can be said about the identity of this image.

Attendant Deities

The *Sasanadevatas* or attendant spirits are found carved along with the images of Tirthankaras. Both the images have attendant deities on either side of them. As per the rules of Jaina iconography, the Yaksha figure is carved on the right side of the Thrithankaras while the Yakshinis are carved on the left. The fact that the Yakshas and Yakshinis are found at the corner of the Thrithankaras makes it clear that they belonged to an early period as the images of these spirits became detached from the Tirthankaras in later times. A recent study on Yakshis noted that Yakshas Syama and Brahma and Yakshinis Jwalamalini and Padmavati are found at the site (Unnikrishnan 2017). None of these could be found. Syama Yaksha is also called Vijaya Yaksha. This Yaksha is found along with the Chandraprabha Tirthankara.

It is not possible for us to identify the Yakshas or Yakshinis before identifying the Tirthankaras. Since one of the images has been identified as Mahavira Tirthankara, it is only legitimate for us to say that the associated figures are those of Matanga and Siddhayika. According to Jaina belief, Magadhan king Bimbisara (Srenika) is supposed to be acting as the chouri-bearer of the Tirthankara. The tree symbol usually depicted is *Sala* tree. There are two attendant figures on the sides of both the Tirthankaras. They hold the flywhisk with both of their hands. This is an iconographic feature found in the early medieval phase of Jainism in Tamil Nadu. Unlike the Tirthankara images, the bodily features of these figures vary. Garment is found on the lower part of the body. Ornaments on the neck, shoulders and hands are usually found in the images of Tirthankaras in other parts of the Tamil land. The *karanta makuta* (the crown in the shape of a cone) on the head and the bands on the shoulders and hands of the

attendant deities in Mahavira image are faintly visible. (Kannan and Lakshminarayanan 2001). The waist bands (*udarabandha)* on the Yaksha figures are very clear. The figures are worn out. They are 17 cm high. The *pitha* is 40 cm wide and 40 cm long. Only the portion of the body upto their knee is carved.

The attendant figures of the *`Pindikkadavul'* image are carved on both sides of the back rest showing them from their knee portions. They are rising just above the shoulders of the Thrithankara image. The reason, perhaps, is that importance is given to the portion of the back rest bearing triple umbrella and the tree symbol. Thus, the attendant figures' back is also supported by the backrest. Part of the head of the attendant figure to the left of the Jaina idol is mutilated. The Yaksha figures are small and are 10 cm high.

Conclusion

The presence of the two images and their stylistic features indicate that Eswaramkod had a Jaina settlement in the early medieval times. As of now, no documentary evidences are available about the exact period of the images. At the same time, the idols reflect the iconographic features of Jaina images found in south India. Only one image could be clearly identified as that of Mahavira.

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