

## **Jain and the Visual Arts**

### **Introduction:**

The Jain religion is a living faith with just over ten million followers through out the world of whom 60,000 are in Britain. Jain temples based on old traditions have been built in Britain, East Africa, Europe, United States, Canada, Hong Kong, Nepal and Japan. Although it is older than Buddhism the artistic tradition of the Jains is least known outside India compared to Buddhism. This was partly because the Jain ascetics were restricted to travel except by foot in olden times. Jainism advocates the possession of right belief, right knowledge and right conduct as a means to attain nirvana. The Jains, despite their rigorous ideal of non-attachment to the physical world have produced an extremely rich cultural heritage in the field of art and architecture. It is the world's most peaceful religion on account of its adherence to non-violence, *ahimsa*, to all living beings.

During the sixth century BC both Jainism and Buddhism emerged as a reformist movement against the Brahmanical ritualistic cult with the sacrificial killings and priestly oligarchy.

The Jains do not recognise the existence of a personal god. To help them achieve liberation, Jains revere twenty-four emancipated beings called Jinas or *Tirthankaras*, makers of ford, who act as teachers and role models to the faithful. The canonical Jain texts, *Agamas*, mention about these *Tirthankaras* or conquerors that make it possible for man to overcome temptation, ignorance and greed to cross the river of existence. There is no historical evidence for dating the first twenty-one *Tirthankaras* but it is known that the twenty-second *Tirthankara*, Neminatha who was a cousin to Lord Krishna, flourished in Saurashtra, near Girnar where he attained his liberation, *moksha*. The twenty-third *Tirthankara*, Parsvanatha lived around 750BC in Banaras. The last *Tirthankara* was Vardhaman Mahavira who was born near Kundalpur, Bihar, as a prince in 599BC. He gave up his kingdom and became a monk at the age of 30 and attained liberation, *moksha*, at the age of 72, in 527BC, by abstaining from food and water. He was slightly older contemporary of Gautama Buddha. They both came from Magadha area in Bihar, India, although they never met.

Jain art elegantly illustrates the religious and aesthetic ideals which are reflected in their temples and in its socio-economic development of their ancient and still vital culture.

### **Historical background**

A highly polished torso of a Jain image probably chiselled in the third century was discovered in Lohanipur near Pataliputra (now Patna), Bihar, and may be the earliest Jain sculpture. Samprati, the grandson of Ashoka is well known in ancient Jain traditions as a convert to and a great patron of Jainism. He gave royal support to the Jain monks and installed many Jain images in old temples.

Between 300BC and 300AD both Jainism and Buddhism spread with vigour and were active in the creation of monuments. The Jains created a major cluster of sites in and around Kankali-Tila near Mathura, in Uttar Pradesh, where Jain sculptures were produced simultaneously with Buddhist and Hindu sculptures by the Mathura school of the Kushan Age. These sculptures, usually in red sandstone, are unique examples of early Jain art. Jainism continued to spread in Central, Western and later to South India.

The early Jain shrines built during the second century were brick built or in monolithic stone caves as seen at Udayagiri and Khandagiri in Orissa or Kalinga. The caves number 30 to 34 in Ellora, built in the ninth century show the *Tirthankaras* in the shrines accompanied by other male and female deities, *Yaksha* and *Yakshis*. The other cave temples showing frescos and sculptures are at Badami, Aihole, Sittanavasal and Shravanabelagola, built during ninth and tenth centuries. The early Jain temples built in the tenth century are still preserved at Khajuraho. The Jains regard the building of temples as very meritorious activity and there are several temple cities at Palitana on Satrunjaya Hills, Girnar in Gujarat, Mount Abu in Rajasthan, Devghadh in Uttar Pradesh and Sammet Shikhar on Parasvanath Hills in Bihar. The best hallmarks of Jain temple architecture are seen at the beautiful white marble temples at Vimal Vasahi at Dilwara, Mount Abu, built in 1023, with its fine intricate carvings of the ceiling, domes, gates, pillars, arches and walls. Also one can see similar beauty in stone and marble at the Dharna Vihar Jain temples at Ranakpur in Rajasthan built in 1446.

### **Jain Sculptures**

Stone and marble sculptures of the images and the temples built around them not only served architecturally as part of religious structures but were objects of devotion for the worshippers. Images on the external walls of the temple represent both Jinas and celestial deities, musicians, dancers, ascetics and angels. In olden days, most of the domestic shrines were built of wood intricately carved with such figures. Apart from hard black schist, soft sandstone, smooth marble or rock crystal were the popular medium and their use of symmetry, harmonious proportions serve to communicate a sense of equanimity and spiritual release. The Jains were the leaders in making metal representation of spiritual icons. These were made for personal use and for dedication in religious establishments. The technique used was the *cire perdue* or lost wax process. The image is first modelled by the master craftsman in a wax resin which is then covered in clay. The clay mould is heated, allowing the wax to melt and be drained away. The mould form created reveals the metal impression of the wax model. It is filled with molten copper alloy. After cooling, the casing is broken away to reveal the metal impression of the wax model. Most bronzes of the early period found in Bihar, Orissa, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, had high copper content. In Gujarat and Rajasthan shiny brass became a favourite metal from the ninth century. Metal sculptures follow the same basic style as stone. In South India the ideal Alloy for statuary has always been the 'Panch Lauha'. This literally means the five irons, but is in fact an amalgam of copper, silver, gold brass and white lead. The casting of images in brass has been carried out in both North and South India since the tenth century.

Jain temple architecture follows the same basic aesthetic norms, theories of proportions and formal concept as the Hindu and Buddhist art. Usually the plan of the temple has an open porch, *mandap*, a closed hall of assembly, *sabha mandapa*, and an inner sanctum, *gabharo or garbhagriha* in which the main idols are kept. The temple is surmounted by a pyramidal roof, *sikhara*, often ending with a water-urn. The inner shrine is usually guarded by richly carved doorways made of silver or wood, which are opened during the daily *aarti-puja* worship.

The stone and bronze sculpture usually show the central figure of the *Tirthankara* with two divine flywhisk bearers and two celestial garland bearers. These are installed in the inner sanctums of the temples. They are shown either cross legged in *padmasana* pose of meditation on a lion throne or standing posture with arms hanging down in *kayotsarga* posture signifying renunciation, on a lotus and often the cognizance symbol, *lanchana*, is provided. For the first *Tirthankara*, Adinatha or Rishabhanatha, a Bull is shown on the pedestal, similarly Neminatha, has a Conch Shell, Parsvanatha, a Snake and for Mahavira a Lion is his symbol. Veneration of the twenty-four *Tirthankaras* is the single most significant devotional focus in Jainism. These perfected beings serve as exemplary role models to guide the faithful on the proper path to liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

Most of the images which look similar are usually shown with broad shoulders, long arms and legs, large hands and feet, elongated earlobes, short hair curling to the right *dakshinavarta*, except for Rishabhanatha who had long hair. All of them have an auspicious *srivatsa* mark in the shape of a diamond, on their chests. A three-tied umbrella rises above the head to emphasize spiritual sovereignty. The motif of a wheel flanked by deer is added below the throne. Usually on the back of the bronze pieces and sometimes the stone sculptures as well, inscriptions show the name of the donors, date when made and the spiritual leaders at the time of the installation.

The Jains are divided into two main traditions, the Digambaras and Svetambaras. Digambara monks are “sky clad” or totally naked, while Svetambara monks are “white clad” i.e. they wear several pieces of unstitched white cloth. There is a distinct difference in temples built by the two sects. In the Svetamabara temples, the images are adorned with crowns and ornaments with large enamel or crystal eyes on top of the carved ones, so that even from the back of a crowded temple the individual can have a personal interaction with the image. In the Digamabara temples the images are unadorned with eyes looking down in meditation. Most of the temples have an inner sanctum where the idols of the main *Tirthankaras* dedicated to that particular temple are consecrated and where the daily puja take place. Just in front of the Digamabara temples they usually have a pillar known as *Manastambha*. At the top of the pillar on four sides are carved images of the Jinas. The pillars are placed on triple platforms and adorned with bells, fly-whisks and triple umbrellas. Some of these old *manastambhas* are found at Chandragiri Hill and Vindhyagiri hills at Shravanabelagola in front of the temples.

### **Jain Paintings**

Until paper was adopted around 1300, books and manuscripts were written on palm leaves. These were devised from long leaves of the talipot palm or short leaf of the Palmyra palm. These leaves were first cut then processed and burnished. Thereafter,

they were trimmed into folios of equal size. The task of copying commenced with the scribe dividing the folio into two or three columns separated by a narrow vertical margin. After completion, the folios were arranged in a pile and strung securely together by means of a cord and enclosed in wooden covers for protection. The whole manuscript was then bound in cloth. The palm-leaf manuscripts were written either in ink with a reed pen or incised with a stylus and smeared with powdered ink. The texts were written in a variant of the *devnagari* script. The illustrated manuscripts portray *Tirthankaras* with iconic representation of monks and worshippers. The most unique aspect of the style is the further eye which protrudes beyond the outline of the face, which was shown in three-quarter profile. The early glimmerings of this style are evident in the frescoes, painted during tenth century, which have recently been discovered in the Jain caves at Ellora. From there, this distinctive style spread to other parts of India. Paper manuscripts replaced the palm-leaf from the fourteenth century. They were modelled on the palm-leaf prototype. Most of the subjects depicted in the manuscripts are usually relating to the dreams before conception, birth, and initiation of the Jina or episodes from their lives.

The Vedic deity Indra or Sakra appears in a lot of manuscripts from the conception to liberation of the Jinas. Worship of auspicious symbols, *asta-mangals* and representation of fourteen dreams, according to Svetambara sect or sixteen dreams according to Digambara sect is seen by the Jina's mother were common subjects in stone, metal sculptures and paintings.

The region of Gujarat had been under Muslim domination in the thirteenth century and Jains played an important role in the economic and commercial activities of the region and contributed to its prosperity. The line of illustration became much finer and included wide spectrum of colours including the use of gold, silver and rich ultra marine derived from lapis lazuli that became the dominant background colour. The major centres of Jain manuscript production were Ahmedabad and Patan in Gujarat. The patrons were mainly Svetambara Jains who considered the commissioning of illustrated books and their donation to Jain temple libraries to be an important merit making activity. While various texts were favoured throughout the history of Jainism, the two most important works during thirteenth century were the illustrated texts of the *Kalpa-Sutra* on the lives of the Jain *Tirthankaras* with canonical texts on the *Paryusana* rites during the monsoon season. The other text was of the story of *Kalakacharya-Katha* – a story of a Jain monk Kalaka who sought the aid of the Sahi Kings who were foreigners- to defeat the evil local ruler, which was an influential moralising work. Another important illustrated text, the *Uttradhyaiana-Sutra*, dated sixteenth century prescribed rules of behaviour for the monastic community. These texts were copied and illustrated at the request of the Jain laity who presented them to their spiritual mentors.

While small manuscript illustrations are certainly the best known Jain paintings to people outside India, there is also an extensive tradition in Jain art and culture of larger paintings from album-size to monumental. Chief within this visually exciting corpus are cosmographical paintings depicting the abstruse structure of the Jain universe, *Jambudvipa*. Briefly, the Jain cosmos is divided into three realms of virtually unfathomable proportions: the upper or celestial world, the middle or mortal world, and the lower or infernal world. The three realms are portrayed either collectively or independently in both abstract and personified representations. The

latter mode particularly expressive and is imagined in the form of a cosmic human being, *lokapurusha*, endowed with fantastic anatomical forms hierarchically arranged to symbolise the three realms of creation.

Other large-scale paintings, *patachitra*, feature tantric deities or esoteric symbols that are an aid in meditation or are used in initiation rites. Another favourite genre are the monumental paintings of Jain pilgrimage sites especially Palitana, Girnar in Gujarat and Sammet Shikhar in Bihar. Depicted in great detail these are displayed once a year during the special festival at the end of the rainy season, so that devotees who are unable to make the pilgrimage can receive the religious merit of visiting the sites simply by viewing their representation.

*Pata* paintings have to go through four stages of preparation. Traditionally, hand woven cotton cloth, *khadi*, is used. Firstly, a thick layer of coating of rice or wheat flour paste is applied on the cloth to seal all the fine holes. When dry, it is polished with the help of a stone Muller or burnished with an agate stone. Once it is smooth and ready the artist would begin his work by sketching in red ochre. A skilled artist works without reference to any sketches, reproducing the familiar compositions and figures that comprise this popular art. When the layout is complete he fills it with different colours and ends it with gold and silver.

Another form of painting was the scrolls, especially the *Vijnaptipatra*, a unique 'letter of request'. The scrolls were long and narrow and varied in size from 8 to 60 feet in length and 6 to 12 inches in width. They were first prepared on separate pieces of paper, painted with opaque watercolours and then pasted on a narrow length of cloth. Around sixteenth century they were so popular that the Moghul emperors Akbar and Jehangir used to send these illustrated letters to the head of the Jain sects to spend their holy period of *Paryusana* in Agra and they would order or give *firman* that there would be no killing of animals during this period. It was believed, their acceptance of the invitation and their presence would bring prosperity to their town and people. The scroll would depict the auspicious Jain symbols, description of the town and the type of welcome they would give and hand written text of the invitation. Each register would show the local merchants, elephants, horses, musicians, dancers, and temples with bright colours and finished with the floral border. The majority of these pictorial manuscripts were stored in the treasure houses of Jain temple libraries, *bhandars* of Gujarat and Rajasthan especially in Patan, Cambay and Jaisalmer which were built and maintained by the Jain community. Apart from the above, embroidered textile wall hangings, banners with gold and silver twisted wire and metallic sequins on silk, velvet and wool materials also provided an ornamental backdrop to the main image in a home shrine.

### **Pilgrimage Sites**

Jain religious monuments are among the oldest and most ornate edifices ever erected in India. In the Jain tradition, places of pilgrimage are called sacred *Tirths*, literally meaning a ford that helps the aspirant in crossing over the ocean of samsara which is full of material world of pain and misery and to attain spiritual fulfilment. These sites have an aura of sanctity due to its association with either the birth of the Jina, or the place where renunciation took place, or where the Jina achieved omniscience, *kevalajnana* and place of liberation or *moksha*.

Pilgrimages and temples are revered places of devotion by the Jains. These sites and temples are open to everyone. One has to observe certain rules like not wearing shoes or carry anything of leather.

## **Rajasthan**

In Rajasthan, magnificent Jain temples of Ranakpur are located on Aravalli Hills. They are known as four faced temple, *chatur-mukha* or *chau-mukha*, on account of its four entrances, each leading to the sanctum. It has got 1444 columns representing the finest forms of art. Each column is a living example of art. The ceiling dome is intricately carved. The idol of Adinatha adorns the main sanctum. On the right of this sanctum there is an idol of Parvanatha whose head is shaded by the hoods of a thousand cobras. The special feature of this idol is that all the cobras are entwined with each other and their tail-ends are invisible. The entire temple complex with its spires greatly adds to the majesty of this place and is the finest expression of architecture with spirituality.

The Dilwara temples at Mt. Abu are unique. The outstanding feature is the extraordinary intricacy of the marble carvings in the domes and pillars. It is a cluster of temples and all the idols are engraved on hard marble together with other deities. In most of the temples the popular carved and most revered *yakshis* are Chakreshwari, for Adinatha; Ambika, signifying mother goddess, usually with a mango tree and a child for Neminatha; Padmavati with a protective deity with a snake hood for Parsvanatha. Hindu deity Sarasvati, Goddess of knowledge riding a peacock and Lakshmi, Goddess of wealth, riding an elephant are often shown in Jain temples. The most artistic part of the temple is its stage and auditorium. From a big round dome, supported by twelve ornamental pillars and artistically designed arches, are suspended eleven circular garlands with carved elephants, horses, ducks, with dancers playing musical instruments.

The Jain temples built in stone on the Jaisalmer Fort are outstanding. These were built in the fifteenth century. They are dedicated to Parsvanatha, Adinatha, Shantinatha, Sambahnatha and Mahavira. In spite of the hardness of the local yellow stone, the sculptors have succeeded in chiselling out numberless shapes and forms of exquisite beauty. There are temple libraries which are housing the rare palm-leaf manuscripts.

## **Gujarat**

Girnar is a mountain range 3100 feet above sea level near the old city of Junagadh. This is the place where the twenty-second *Tirthankara*, Neminatha also known as Aristanemi took his renunciation, penance and ultimately attained moksha. To reach these temples, one has to climb nearly 3500 steps. After completing the ascent, one reaches the temple. It is here that Neminatha arrived at the door of his beloved Rajimati for marriage but on hearing the pathetic wailings of the animals collected for the feast, he declines to marry. The animals were released and Neminatha becomes a monk. It is said that Rajimati also followed in his auspicious footsteps and started the Sadhvi Sangha of female ascetics. The magnificence of the black marble statue of Neminatha and the beauty of the temple is unique.

The temples of Taranga built in the twelfth century are dedicated to the first and second *Tirthankaras*, Adinatha and Ajitnatha respectively. Every wall of the temple is richly engraved. Some of these temples were occupied by Buddhist in earlier period and it is believed, the Mahayana goddess Tara was unearthed here and hence the Taranga name. She has been given the name of Jain *yakshi*, Padmavati. There are Digambara and Svetambara temples on the hills where the ancient footprints of Ajitnatha are found.

Palitana on mount Shutranchaya is truly a temple city and the most popular pilgrimage place. There are almost over 800 temples spread over several peaks housing over 11000 stone idols and over 700 metal idols. One has to climb about 3200 steps but once you reach the top the view of these temples is breathtaking, especially at dawn during sun rise. These hills are the most sacred for the Svetambara Jains.

Traditionally, it was Adinatha or Rishabhanatha, the first *Tirthankara* is said to have sanctified the hill near the old Rayan tree in the courtyard in front of the temple and delivered his first sermon. It is also believed that his son Bharat and grandson, Pundarika attained nirvana here. Countless saints, great souls and ascetics have attained the supreme salvation here. Palitana is the most sacred place where the devotees become free from every worry. At the bottom of the hill are a lot of other temples and boarding places, *dharmashalas*.

It is also believed that the five Pandavas of the Mahabharata epic also attained *moksha* here.

## **Bihar**

In Bihar we have Pavapuri near Patna which is a very important pilgrimage place as it was here that the Mahavira, the last *Tirthankara* gave his first sermon and also attained liberation, *moksha*. The temple, Jal-mandir is beautifully built in the middle of a lotus lake. It is believed that the festival of lights, Diwali, started from this auspicious place after Mahavira's nirvana. Every Diwali many pilgrims visit this site to celebrate this event.

The other holiest place of pilgrimage in Bihar is Sammet Shikhar (Peak of Wisdom) on Parsvanath Hills, where twenty of the twenty-four *Tirthankaras* attained liberation, *moksha*. In 1592 Moghul Emperor Akbar gifted this mountain to the Jain Muni Acharya Heervijay Suri on being very impressed with his personality and over the period it has been purchased and maintained by Anandji Kalyanji Trust. The hills are approximately 4,500 feet above sea level. They are spread over thirty-two miles. There are shrines housing the foot prints in marble or stone of various *Tirthankaras* and other *munis*, ascetics who went to *moksha* from these hills. The highest shrine is dedicated to Parsvanath. There is a Jal-Mandir temple which has a black marble image of twenty-third *Tirthankara*, Parsvanath who was born in 877BC and attained *Moksha* here in 777BC. One has to climb and walk for about eighteen miles to see all the shrines. The scenic beauty of these hills, rivulets, sandalwood trees, herbal shrubs and the aura and the changing colours during different times of the day are just mesmerising.

## **South India**

In South India the holiest place for the Digambara Jains is Shravanabelagola near Bangalore. The colossal statue of Bahubali or Gommeteshwar who was the son of the first *Tithankara*, Rishabhanatha, is 57 feet high carved in 981 AD, from a single living rock of fine granite and is free standing on Vindiyagiri or Indragiri Hill. There is inscription at the feet in Kannada, Tamil Grantha, Prakrit, and Sanskrit languages. Bahubali was the first soul to attain enlightenment in this cosmic cycle. He stood lost in meditation for so long that creepers, vines and snakes began to embrace his body.

Mahamastakabhisheka, or Great Head Anointing Ceremony which usually takes place every twelve years, last one in February 2006 took place after thirteen years when hundreds of thousands of devotees and visitors attended this ceremony. The head to foot is lustrated with holy substances during the ceremony. The next one will be in 2018. One has to climb 600 steps to reach the top, bare feet, if possible, without the use of any leather. On the smaller hill opposite, Chandragiri Hill there are caves and inscriptions dated 321BC, relating to Mauryan King Chandragupta, grandson of King Ashok, and his mentor Bhadrabahu who observed the Jain vow of *Sallekhana*, fasting till death. There are 14 other temples on this hill. Bahubali's message of peace through renunciation, non-violence, friendship and meditation is a poignant reminder to us all in these troubled times, when we desperately need to create bridges of peace and harmony and learn from the pacifistic Jains and their spiritually potent art.

### **Sobhag (Raju) Shah**

A retired Chartered Surveyor and a volunteer at the Victoria and Albert Museum