

THE SPREAD OF JAINISM IN AGASTEESWARAM TALUK

K. JENIFER

Research Scholar, Nesamony Memorial Christian College
Marthandam, Tamil Nadu, India

Dr. C. SELVARAJ

Professor, Lakshmipuram College of Arts and Science
Manavalakurichi, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract

Agasteeswaram taluk is a taluk located in Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, India. The headquarters of the taluk is the town of Nagercoil. Agasteeswaram taluk was transferred from Thiruvananthapuram District of the Travancore-Cochin State to Kanyakumari district. The origins of Jainism can be traced back to the Indus River valley civilization of 3000 B.C. Jains believe that there were 24 great teachers. These twenty-four teachers are called Tirthankaras-people who had attained all knowledge while living (Moksha) and preached it to the people. They believe in reincarnation. From a very early date Jainism flourished in Agasteeswaram taluk. The Jains believe that their religion is as old as Vedic religion. The religion of Jains was probably founded by Parsvanath known as the twenty-third Jain Tirthankara. The Jains paid due attention to the excavation of caverns, cave temples and buildings of structural temples with sculptures of Tirthankaras and their attendants such as Yakshas and Yakshis. There are no hills except the Maruthuva Mala (Medicine hill) which is noted for the numerous medicinal herbs which grow there. Maruthuvamala attracts spiritualists seeking solace in solitude. Further, the paper focuses on the spread of Jainism within Agasteeswaram taluk.

Introduction

Agasteeswaram taluk has great historical and cultural antiquity. It was a centre of Hinduism. Temples with architectural excellence are found in places like Suchindram, Thiruvattar, Padmanabhapuram and the 12 temples connected with the concept of Sivalayaottam are famous. This is one of the most fertile and populous taluks. The Vadaseri river, also called Palayar, flows through the taluks of Thovalai and Agasteeswaram in a south-easterly direction and falls into the Manakudi lake after a course of 23 miles, passing through the towns of Bhuthapandi, Kottar, Nagercoil, Thazhakudi and Suchindram. The present Agasteeswaram taluk then formed a part of this Lemuria. The Paraliyaru now known as Palayaaru in this taluk is none other than the "Pahrali" river of the disappeared Lemuria. On the top of Thiruchcharanathumalai, there is a natural cave formed by an overhanging rock resting upon another. This cave has been improved by masonry work into a temple. The names Agasthiyar, Agasteeswaram and Agasthialingam are very common areas of this taluk and even the ladies bear the name Agasti. The Nadars as a caste groaned under the social system which existed in Agasteeswaram taluk. The work of the Christian missionaries attracted the Shanars to a great extent. Jainism had emerged as revolutionary religions opposing the Vedic religion. In Agasteeswaram taluk women held high places and were admitted to the benefits of education. Thiruchcharanathumalai which means 'the hill holy to the charanars' which means Jain or Buddhist monks who have obtained supernatural powers. Both literary and epigraphical sources testify that places such as Kottar, Thirunandikkarai, Thirukurandy, Thirucharnattumalai and Kurathiarai were the important centre of Jainism. There are different opinions among scholars regarding the origin and spread of Jainism in Agasteeswaram. However, it is known that it was affected through Chandragupta Maurya who came to Southern India for the purpose. It is said that sage Visaga was sent towards south to

spread the religion in the Chera, Chola and the Pandya countries. Jainism have spread in the 2nd Century B.C. as it is testified by Jain inscriptions in Brahmi characters found in the hills of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. If the Lemurian theory is true and if the Sangams of the Tamils were actually held in the lost continent of Lemuria certainly the history of the Tamils should commence from the Agasteeswaram taluk. There are different opinions among scholars regarding the origin and spread of Jainism in Kanyakumari. However, it is known that it was effected through Chandragupta Maurya who came to Southern India for the purpose. It is said that they forecast about a severe famine in the Magadan empire during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya who advised the people to move away temporarily in order to escape from that onslaught. He himself also, leaving his princely attire, moved towards, South India along with the Jaina monk Badrababu and his 12,000 disciples and settled down at Seravanabelgola in Karnataka, and from there they made efforts to spread the religion to further south by sending their disciples.

Kottar

Kottar was a town in the heart of this region comprising the present day Nagercoil town. The old name of Nagercoil was Kottar. At Kottar Jainism flourished in ancient days. Thirugnana sambandar a Saiva saint of the 7th century A.D. ridiculed the Jain monks who were roaming in the streets of Kottar. It was referred as “Kottarana-mum-mudi-cholapurathana” which was an important centre of Jainism. Currently there is no Jain temple present but still the inscriptions found in this region refer to the existence of Jain temples and the donations (Pallichandam) made to such temples. An inscription found in the Vishnu temple at Puravaseri dated in the Kollam year

372 (1196 A.D) refer to the grant of Pallichandam of the Jain temple at Kottar is one of the best

example for the existence of Jainism during ancient days. Also the inscription of Parantaka Pandya of 12th century A.D. refers to the boundary of the devadana lands belonging to the Goddess excluding the Pallichandam of the Jains. This Pallichandam belonging to the Jain temple at Kottar seems to have existed near Thovalai. This is supported by the Kalugumalai inscription assignable to the 8th century A.D. The Nagaraja temple which is present in Nagercoil town itself appears to have been originally a Jain temple. The presences of stone images with serpent hoods suggest that this temple was originally sacred to serpent Gods. These serpent Gods were used to be held in great esteem by the Jains in earlier days and this was supported by a number of inscriptions present in the temple. 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). The Kalabharas who subverted the Chera, Chola and Pandya 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. Jainism faced an unexpected decline in the 7th century A.D. However, soon it recovered from adversities and came to possess a fresh lease of life by adjusting itself to the circumstances and accommodating some

elements from brahmanical religion. The Tamil Vellalas like the Nairs enjoyed a high social status and possessed large areas of landed properties, mainly in Agasteeswaram taluk. Although Kottar was a place of Jaina importance in medieval times, Jaina 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 Jaina recluses of Kottaru like Pushpanandi, Uttanandiadigal, Vimalachandra, Santisena and Santisenapperiyadigal who had consecrated images of Tirthankaras at the Kalugumalai monastery. The existence of the Jaina temple at Kottar in the 12th century is also attested to by some inscriptions from Puravaraseri and Kanyakumari. Late medieval sculptures of Mahavira, Parsvanatha and Padmapati and some inscriptions of the 15th and 16th centuries found in the present temple, mentioning names of two Jaina Panditas, Kamalvahana and Gunavira are indisputable evidence of its Jaina affiliation and good state of preservation. Jainism had a chequered history over three and a half century under the early Pandyas. It had gained wide popularity in 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.

Thirugnana Sambander about Jainism

The Naga and Nagaraja mention the two Jain teachers Kamalavahana Pandita and Gunavirapandita. In addition to this, there are a number of images of Tirthankaras like Parsvanatha, Mahavira and Padmavati were also present. So, it is clear that this temple was originally a Jain temple and later it was converted into a Hindu temple during the time of Bhakti movement. Kottar seems to be the seat of the orthodox sect of Jainism. Thirugnana Sambander who lived in the 7th century describes the Jains as goondas moving nude through the streets of Kottar. From this we can clearly understand that Sambander refers to the orthodox sect of Jains - the Diggambara sect who neglect the wearing of dresses. In Kottar, at the Jain temple the Jain monks used to recite the Jain scriptures regularly and they had good regard in other similar centres. The inscriptions at Kalugumalai mention a number of Jain monks and nuns who visited Kalugumalai and caused the images to be sculptured. Among these monks, some of them were from Kottar, Thiruchcharanattumalai (Citharal) and prominent among them were from Patpanandi-Vimalacandra kuravadigal, Uttanandikkuravadigal and Patamulatanarangam of Thirukottaru. The Nagaraja temple inscriptions refer to two important Jain teachers and they are Kamalavahana Panditha and Gunavira Panditha in whose name endowments were also made. So it is clear that Kottar was a seat of Jainism in the earlier days.

Thirukurandy

Thirukurandy is a place situated near Suchindram. It was a centre of Jain monks. An inscription found in the Jain temple testifies that, Thirukuranday is an advance training centre for Jains, where eminent personalities of the Jains were settled down. Religious discourses between the Jains and the Hindus often took place here. An inscription found in the Thanumalaiyan Temple at Suchindram established such a practice. It also evident that the prevalence of Kalugarra (a kind of corporal punishment awarded to the Jains by the Hindus) which proves that this was also a centre of Jainism in this district.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration of all the above facts, it is to be concluded that Jainism has spread in this region in the early days of Christian era and flourished during the medieval period. Followed by that due to the Hindu revivalism caused by the outbreak of Bhakti movement, Jainism began to decline and disappeared from this region.

References

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