



## TIRTHANKARA MAHAVIRA IN LITERARY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines Jainism through a combined analysis of literary traditions and archaeological evidence, with a focused study on the figure of Mahavira. It outlines the conceptual foundations of Jainism through terms such as Jina and Tirthankara, and surveys primary and secondary textual sources from both Śvetāmbara and Digambara traditions alongside references in Brahmanical literature. The study then evaluates archaeological materials, including sculptures, stupas, inscriptions, and excavation findings from sites such as Mathura and Kankalitila, to trace the historical development of Jain religious practices and imagery. Particular attention is given to the tradition of the twenty-four Tirthankaras, with detailed discussion of Parshvanatha and Mahavira. The paper further analyses the evolution of Jain iconography, especially the formal and symbolic features of Tirthankara images across periods. Through selected sculptural case studies of Mahavira, the study demonstrates how material remains complement textual accounts in reconstructing the historical and visual dimensions of Jainism.*

**Keywords:** Jain iconography; Archaeology; Literature; Mathura art; Kankalitila



## INTRODUCTION

Jainism is reckoned among one of the oldest religions of India. The origin of the word *Jaina* has taken place from the Sanskrit word *Jina* that means *the conqueror*. The meaning of *Jaina* word is - *of jina* i.e. view of *jina*, saying of *Jina* or spiritual advice of the *jina*. It means that the religion that was instructed by the *Jina* is called *Jainism*. The other suitable synonyms for the word *Jina* are- '*jinendra, jineshwara, jinadeva, arhat, arhant, arihant, arhant* etc. The word Tirthankara has been derived from the two words i.e. *tri* base and *thak* (suffix).

It means that, after the attainment of *Kevalya*, and by establishing *Tirtha* or *Sangha* by the collective effort of *sadhus - sadhavis* and *shravakas- shravikas* they are also called as *tirthankaras*. Jainism has been revered in the form of self-philosophy ever since the trend of self-conquest begins to be clearly mentioned in the literature of Jainism. Probably during this period people started treating this religion as Jainism and its awardees as *jina*. The said names have been used in the texts like *Yogavashishtha, Srimadbhagavata, Vishnupuran, Padmapuran, Matsyapurana, Shaktayan grammar* etc.

## LITERARY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

As regards the Jainism both kinds of sources are available be it literary or archaeological- Under these both the original and secondary sources are available e.g. *Agamas, Kalpasutra, Angavijja, Paumchariya, Vasudevahindi, Avashyakachurna* etc. Literary sources of *shwetambara* tradition- *Acharadinkar, Pravachansarodhhar, Nirvankalika, Chaturvinshatika, Vividhatirthakalpa*, Literary sources of *dighambara* Tradition- *Harivanshapurana, Adipurana, Pratishthasarasangraha, Pratishthasarodhhar* and *Partishthatilakam* forms the main sources. The original sources other than Jain literary sources are- *Rigveda, Yajurved, Mahabharat, Ashtadhyayi, Skandhapuran, Vishnupuran, Lankavatar* etc. Among secondary texts- the *Jaina Iconography*, B.C. Bhattacharya, *Jaina Iconography*, H.D. Sankaliya, *Notes on Jaina Art*, A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Jains Remains at Rajgiri, Reports of Kankalitila*, A. Cunningham, *Study of Jaina Art*, U.P. Shah etc.

Archaeological Sources comes the study of the two kinds of antiquity-Jaina Antiquities conserved in the museums and Jaina resources at archaeological sites.



Some scholars establish relations between the saints mentioned in Rigveda and Jaina *shramanas*. Vedic literature mentions the name of Tirthankaras. Rigveda mentions Rishabha and Yajurveda mentions Ajita.

Many other evidences that validate Jainism in ancient literature which will probably be of use for the people who believes in Jainism are-*shishnadeva, nagnahu, urdhavareta, urdhavmanthi, keshin, vatarshana, nirgrantha, shramana, shaman, saman, yati, vratya, tyajya, Naginin* etc. Among Archaeological evidences Sculptures, Stupa and Inscriptions are the main sources. Some sculptures from Indus Civilizations have been obtained that are very similar to the sculptures of Tirthankaras (Rawat 2016: 21-52). Hence some scholars perceive parts of Jainism in Indus Civilization. Two sculptures have been obtained from Lohanipur, Patna from the same place belonging to the two different historical periods (Maurya and Sunga) with which some Mauryan silver coins and bricks have been found which are the approval of the fact that these sculptures belong to the said period (Rawat 2016: 61-62). Sculpture of Parshava has been displayed at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Museum, Mumbai. Following this, many sculptures of Tirthankaras were constructed in Mathura Art during the period of Kushanas. The sculptures made in the Mathura art were mainly of Rishabh, Nemi, Parshava and Mahavira. From the excavation at the Kankalitila mound of Mathura, the Jaina sculptures from Sunga period upto 1032 CE have been obtained which enriches history and archaeology (Smith 1969). Some scholars on this basis believe that oldest religious images constructed were, was that of Jainism.

While taking the name of Stupa, attention goes to the Buddhist stupas but it is not so. Jaina Stupas were also constructed. Many *ayagapattas* have been obtained during the excavations from Kankalitila, Mathura over which were depicted three kinds of stupa (Ghosh 1975: 55-60). Kankalitila itself is a place of Jainism (Ghosh 1975: 55-60). Hence, the Jaina Stupa has come to light not only from northern India but from Eastern and Southern India too (Rawat 2016: 93-114). A grand stupa has come to light from the Udaigiri excavation in Orissa (Rawat 2016: 107-108), similarly from Vaddamanu, Guntoor, excavations in Andhra Pradesh (Birla Archeological and Cultural Research Institute, Hyderabad 1981-85 CE) too (Rawat 2016: 108-111), the Jaina Stupas have been obtained which belongs to the latter Mauryan period. In this excavation not only the antiquities but the inscriptions too have been obtained.



Similarly, from the archaeological evidences, the Hathigumpha Inscription from Udaigiri belonging to first century BCE is of great significance (Ghosh 1975: 81-86). It mentions that Kharvela brought back that Jina sculpture from Magadha, which was taken by the Magadhan King *tivasat* year ago. Most of the scholars consider *tivasat* as three hundred years. If we add 300 years to first century BCE then it will be 400 BCE. At that time Magadha was ruled by powerful Magadhan ruler Mahapadmananda. Hence the sculpture that has been mentioned in Kharvella Inscription would have belonged to 400 BCE. In this way, by studying the intensive study of the archaeological remains, many more information can be gathered (Rawat 2016: 57-59).

With the subtle study of literary and archaeological material, it is known that in Jainism there were twenty-four Tirthankaras- Rishabha, Ajita, Sambhava, Abhinandana, Sumita, Padmaprabha, Suparshva, Chandraprabha, Suvidhi, Sheetala, Shreyansh, Vasupujya, Vimala, Ananta, Dharma, Shanti, Kunthu, Ar, Malli, Munisuvrata, Nami, Nemi, Parshava and Mahavira (Kalpasutra 230). In the tenth century with the coming in existence of Nath community, the word *nath* was added at the end of the name of Tirthankara (Rawat 2010: 56).

First Tirthankara Rishabha or Adinatha is named as the propagator of Jainism. It is believed that the *brahmi* script had its origin from his daughter Brahmi and our country's name Bharata originated from his son's name 'Bharata'. Rishabha is regarded as the father of *asi* (syahi i.e. ink), *masi* (i.e. metal) and *kushi* (*krishi* i.e. agriculture) (Rawat 2016: 9).

There is a difference of opinion regarding the Nineteenth Tirthankara Malli that whether Malli was a man or a woman. *Digambara* tradition regards Malli as male, because *digambara* tradition does not consider woman worthy of attaining *kevalya* or salvation. But *shwetambara* Tradition considers woman to be equally worthy of attaining *kevalya* so they regard Malli as woman. A beautiful female sculpture of Malli has been obtained from Unnao, U.P. which is at present displayed and is enhancing the beauty of State Museum, Lucknow (Rawat 2010: 187).

The twenty second Tirthankara is Nemi, Rathnemi or Arishtanemi, who is the cousin of Sri Krishna. He is mentioned and is described and depicted in art and literature as Sri Krishna's Cousin (Rawat 2010: 51-62).



Twenty third Tirthankara is Parshva. Who is specially mention in Vyakhya Pragyaapti (20.63). He got his salvation about 250 years prior to Mahavira i.e. 521 BCE at the age hundred at *sammedashikhara* (Parasnaath Mountain, Hazaribagh, Bihar). According to Achrang sutra (1,7,8,10) The parents of Mahavira were the followers of Parshava. According to Kalpasutra (191) Mahavira followed the same paths which were observed by his previous Tirthankaras. From the dialogue of the follower Gautam the historicity of Parshava is ascertained (Uttaraddhyayansutra 44, 47). The birth place of Parshava was Varanasi and he obtained his *kevalya* or salvation at Ahichhatra. He visited the places like Vaishali, Hastinapur, Kampilya, Kaushambhi, Rajgir and Sahet -Mahet (Jain 2005: 77).

There is no information regarding the long period of 250 years i.e. between the attainment of the *kevalya* of Parshava and the birth of Mahavira. From Sutrakritang (1,11,11) we come to know that during this period there was the rise of about 363 doctrines. It is not clear that after Parshava there was any such notable personality who could come in front and who could reorganize Jainism, and propagate it. But it was Mahavira who brought changes in the circumstances and with his character, farsightedness and on the basis of his activity, again reorganized and propagated Jainism. Mahavira was born in 527 BCE at Kundagram a suburb of Vaishali I the house of a Gyatrik *Kshatriya* Siddhartha and Trishala. Siddhartha had two sons Nandivardhana and Vardhmana. His wife was Yashodhara and had a daughter named Priyadarshini and son in law Jamali. When Vardhamana reached the age of thirty his father Siddhartha died. Since Vardhamana was reflective from the beginning, so a year after his father's death (Kalpasutra 122) he left his home and after taking due permission taken from his elder brother Nandivardhana became a *Jain Bhikshu* after a severe penance of twelve years, he attained *kevalya* under a *shaal* tree at the bank of *Ujjuvalia* (Rijupalika) river (form of Shyamlak Grihapati) near *Jambhiyagam* (Jumbhika) at the age of forty three.

Tirthankara Mahavira spent rest of his thirty years in the propagation of his religion. He visited many places- Alambhika, Champa, Kaushambi, Pawa, Mithila, Nalanda, Rajgriha, Shravasti, Siddharthpur, Varanasi, Vaishali etc. for the promotion of his religion. Not only this he also added fifth vow to Jainism i.e. Brahmacharya. Since Mahavira till date Jainism is flourishing



without any hassles. The soul of Jainism physically resides in the images. Along with the image construction of Mahavira, the images of other twenty-three Tirthankaras are also being constructed at wider scale. But till fifth and sixth century only the sculptures of only Rishabha, Nemi, Parshva and Mahavira were constructed. In the sixth and seventh century, for the first time in a text named Samvayangsutra (321.43), the symbols of twenty-four Tirthankaras were determined. Hence around seventh century CE, the image of other Tirthankaras (Acharangsutra 4,8,12,11), besides the four mentioned above also began to be constructed.

The Icons of Tirthankaras were constructed either in *kayotsarga* standing posture or in meditative posture. Along with it the *lanchhan* (symbols), image of *yaksha- yakshini*, *chakra*, *singh*, *padasana*, *padasanavastra*, *shravak- shravaika*, *bhakta*, *chhatra*, *jalabhisheka* etc. are added too.

The colour of Mahavira is golden, symbol is lion, *yaksha* is Matanga, *yakshi* is Siddhayika. The oldest idols of Mahavira are from Mathura and belong to the Kushana period. They are constructed in meditative and standing posture along with the symbol lion and *chakra*. The sculptures belonging to this period adorns the Government Museum, Mathura, and the State Museum, Lucknow. Till fourth century the sculptures were constructed without these symbols. During Gupta period a new kind of Mahavira image comes into view which is called as *Jivantswami* sculpture. Actually, after the death of his father, Mahavira stayed in palace for a year. Since then, he started living in a worried posture with clothes and ornaments. The artist gave the sculpture, the same form with clothes in *kayotsarga* posture in stone which was obtained from Akota in Gujarat. Medieval period too witnessed the construction of similar types of images.

The sculptures between the period from eighth to twelfth century CE have been obtained from Mathura, Bharatpur, Gyaspur, Kumbhariya, Deogarh, Khajuraho, Sonbhandar, Badami, Aihole, Halebid, Hyderabad, Chennai etc. The life scenes of Mahavira were depicted began since the time of Kushanas period which is preserved in the State Museum, Lucknow. In this there is the depiction of pregnancy change at the time of Mahavira's birth. The features of three special sculptures here are as follows –

Mahavira in meditation- This sculpture of the twenty-fourth Tirthankara Mahavira Swami was obtained from Varanasi and is on display at Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi. It is made of sandstone of ochre colour. Jina is seated in meditation posture. Hair is braided, arched eyebrows, half-closed eyes and gentle, calm face, lips are thick but attractive, long ears, rings are clearly visible on the neck. Simple aura, sky-traveling deity and *chavnardhar* in *tribhanga* posture are depicted. The cloth of the Tirthankara's seat is decorated and hangs much lower than usual. There are two lions on both sides of the footrest. *Dharmachakra* is depicted in the middle of them. Two standing figures are engraved on the sides of both the lions. Due to which other artistic features are not visible. This is the first sculpture with a stigma. On the basis of artistic characteristics, it has a prominent place in the field of art and its construction period is 6<sup>th</sup> century CE and its measurement is 136×65×16 cm. It's Acc. No. is 161(fig.1).

Headless seating Mahavira-This statue is of the twenty-fourth Tirthankara Mahavira. It is made of ochre sandstone, which was obtained from Mahavan, Mathura and is currently on display in the State Jain Museum, Mathura. The Tirthankara is present in a meditative posture, without a head, on an ornate seat. On closer inspection, the remnants of a halo can be seen. The auspicious symbol *shrivatsa* is missing in the middle of the broad chest, but the navel is visible. In the entourage, two *chavardharas* are standing in a ruined state, wearing clothes and ornaments. The base of the feet is very ornate, on which a cloth hangs. It is clear. The front part of the pedestal of this statue has been rubbed due to which it is difficult to identify the marks and other figures. But on closer inspection, three *kirti mukhas*, a crouching lion in the cloth, *shravaka-shravika* on the sides and the mark of lion are clearly visible. The name and period of this statue has not been determined in the museum. But the author has identified it. According to which, on the basis of artistic features, the construction period is approximately 11<sup>th</sup> century CE and the measurement is 59×40×27 cm. It's Acc. No. is 12-259 (fig.2).

Mahavira in meditation- This statue is also of the 24th Tirthankara Mahavira, which was found from Bateshwar and is preserved in the newly built Jain temple. The head of this statue made of sandstone of dull colour is carved. An artistic *shrivatsa* and navel are carved in the middle of the chest. The right thigh of the Jina seated in meditation posture is broken. A lion is carved on the seat. In place of lions inside the chariot below the seat, there is a mark of some other animal which is adorned with ornaments, but it is not clear due to being broken. In this statue,



in place of *dharma chakra*, a 'mouse' is carved which is standing and on its sides two female disciples adorned with clothes and ornaments are raising their right hands and touching the mouse with their left hands. Probably the female disciples are preventing the mouse from going near the lion. It has an inscription. On the basis of art style, it was made around 11th-12th century CE and its measurement is 31×26×12 cm. (fig.3).

## SUMMARY

Thus, after a comprehensive study of literary and archaeological remains, it is known that the description of Mahavira is not only accumulated in the literature, but abundant materials related to them can be obtained from the antiquities as well. This covers the whole account of Mahavira from the normal life up to the various works done by Mahavira as Tirthankara.



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## PLATES



**Fig. 1:** Seating Mahavira, Varanasi, 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE



**Fig. 2:** Seating Mahavira, Mahavan, 11<sup>th</sup> c. CE



**Fig. 3a and 3b:** Seating Mahavira, Bateshvar, 11<sup>th</sup> c. CE