

ECHOING UNHEARD VOICES AND UNSEEN SUFFERING IN JAIN TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE OF DILWARA AND RANAKPUR

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Abstract

Jainism is known worldwide for its principle of non-violence (*ahimsā*), which is not merely a philosophical concept but an integral part of the daily lives of its practitioners. Jain literature and temple traditions accord equal importance to the lives of birds and animals, emphasizing their intrinsic value alongside human life. This paper explores the representation and significance of birds and animals in the temple architecture of Dilwara and Ranakpur in Rajasthan, dating to the early medieval period. The anthropomorphic representation of birds in these temples served as a medium of communication with society, reflecting affection towards birds, appreciation of their presence, and recognition of their role in human life. Jain practices not only emphasize the protection and welfare of animals but also acknowledge the contributions of these beings to human society. For instance, the temples of Dilwara and Ranakpur commemorate the role of elephants in transporting marble for temple construction by providing them with a special place within the temple premises. Jain temple art and architecture thus embody the Jain ethos of compassion and the well-being of all living beings, an ideal that is also deeply expressed in Jain literary traditions.

Introduction

In the Indian subcontinent, various philosophical streams emerged, some of which later came to be studied as distinct sects or religions, such as Jainism and Buddhism. Karma forms the foundation of all the philosophical schools that originated in the Indian subcontinent. While studying a religion or sect, one must be careful not to rely solely on its scriptures and philosophy: a broader understanding of the social context in which it originated and developed is equally essential (Bithoo). Jainism, a living faith in India (Shah, Studies in Jaina Art 3), flourished in many parts of the Indian subcontinent with a very high emphasis on non-violence (*ahimsā*), both personal and social which is a distinct feature of Jainism (Kumar 1).

All the sects or religions in India, having emerged in the same social milieu, carry a few common features, and the same can be seen in the arts associated with them. Shah rightly points out, “It must be remembered that classification of arts on sectarian basis does not stand to reason, for no art is entirely Jaina, Buddhist or Hindu” (Shah, Studies in Jaina Art 3). But at the same time, it is also important to see the developments in the temple architecture, which, at a certain level, distinguish them from each other.

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In the Śvetāmbara Jain tradition, image worship of *tīrthaṅkaras*, in the form of *Jīvantasvāmin* image worship, is said to go back to the life time of Mahāvīra.³ During the early medieval period, large temple complexes dedicated to *tīrthaṅkaras* and Hindu gods and goddesses were constructed. Their walls were adorned with sculptural narratives depicting episodes from the lives of the *tīrthaṅkaras*, the exploits of Hindu deities, and other religious themes. These temples were built in accordance with prescriptive texts while also embodying the philosophical ideas associated with the respective sect or religion.

This paper examines the depiction of birds and animals and their symbolic significance within the temple complex. The concept of the temple is discussed in detail in architectural treatises such as the *Mānasāra* and *Māyāmata*, while the iconography of gods and goddesses, along with their respective vehicles (*vāhanas*), is elaborated in texts such as the *Rūpamaṇḍana*, *Pratiṣṭhāsāra-Saṅgraha*, and the *Agnipurāṇa*. A study of temples, including those constructed in modern India, reveals that although their architectural forms have undergone significant changes, the temple has continued to retain its central role as a place of worship. At the same time, a temple is neither merely a repository of sculpture nor simply a venue for ritual performances and devotional singing. Rather, it is a carefully conceived sacred space in which architecture, iconography, ritual, and philosophy converge. If we attempt to define the temple by considering both small and large temples constructed in modern India, two broad conceptions emerge. One is that when a devotee removes his shoes outside a structure, from there the temple begins (Babb, Cort and Meister 2). Meisters also mentions that a temple needs a particular spot or place for its establishment. On the other hand, the worship can be done anywhere, but the temple is a space marked by a building where certain physical acts of adoration coupled with certain systematized prayers, mantras, and musical invocation can yield certain physical and psychological results (Babb, Cort and Meister 64). Building on these definitions, this paper investigates the purpose of the different kinds of images found within the temple and explores their literal, symbolic, and metaphysical meanings. To explore these ideas, this study focuses on the Dilwara Jain Temples and the Ranakpur Jain Temple.

The Dilwara Jain Temple complex is located at Mount Abu, one of the most sacred pilgrimage sites in Jainism, approximately 18 miles (29 km) northwest of Abu Road in the Sirohi district of Rajasthan. Among its temples, the Vimalavasahī (11th century CE) and the Lūṇavasahī (also known as the Tejapala Temple, 13th century CE) are particularly renowned for their exquisite marble sculpture and architectural craftsmanship.

Moreover, Gupta and Asthana (1-2) observe that

[D]uring the olden days 'art was not for art[s] sake' as it is now. The so-called 'works of art' were parts of some belief-system, written or unwritten, and some monument, religious or secular with religious beliefs attached to it.

³ Shah mentions that the tradition of Jīvantasvāmi image worshipped at Vidiśā and Vītabhaya-pattana, from ancient works like the Āvaśyaka Cūrṇi, the Nīśītha Cūrṇi and the Vasudevahiṇḍi...a sandal-wood portrait sculpture was carved in the life-time of Mahāvīra when he was meditating in his palace, about a year prior to his renunciation (Shah, Studies in Jaina Art 4).

B. C. Bhattacharya (Bhattacharya), U. P. Shah (Shah, *Studies in Jaina Art*),⁴ Jain and Fischer (Jain and Fischer), M. N. P. Tiwari (Tiwari), and Sankalia (Sankalia) elaborately discuss the iconography of Jain *tīrthaṅkaras* (ford-makers), *yakṣas* and *yakṣiṇīs* (demi-gods and goddesses), *vidyādevīs* (goddesses of learning), *navagrahas* (nine specific venerable ones), and *dikpālas* (directional deities) and the life events of Jain *tīrthaṅkaras* (*kalyāṇakas*). However, in all these studies, certain aspects have either been mentioned only in passing or have not been discussed at all. This paper seeks to examine these relatively neglected aspects through a study of the architecture of the selected temples.

Dancing and Singing Birds or Kinnaras and Kinnarīs

The *Tattvārthasūtra* mentions eight types of *vyantara devas* (peripatetic deities)⁵ among which *kinnaras* (celestial musicians) constitute one class. They are mythological beings that are sometimes represented in half-human and half-bird form (Kumar 22). They are the producers of celestial music (Varni 124-25). They are commonly represented as male-female pairs engaged in dancing and music, described as “as excellent students of *laya*” (Debroy 229). In *Mahābhārata*’s *Ādiparvan*, *kinnaras* are frequently described as dwellers in trees and are also mentioned as the residents of mountains (Debroy 441). In one instance, while travelling through the sky, Arjuna beholds the region around Mount Mandara resounding with the melodious songs of the *kinnaras*, and the groves of the Nandana forest are likewise described as belonging to their king; their association with music is so deeply embedded in the literary tradition that the voices of beloveds are frequently compared to the melodious voices of the *kinnaras* (Debroy 229). In *Mahābhārata* and other texts, *kinnaras* are mythical beings with human bodies and heads of horses (Monier-Williams 283). We can see numerous examples of *kinnaras* and *kinnarīs* in Buddhist literature. The *Lotus Sūtra* describes the Buddha’s assembly as comprising both humans and nonhuman beings where among the nonhuman attendees were the four kings of the *kinnaras* – Dharma, Sudharma, Mahādharma, and Dharmadhara – each accompanied by several hundreds of thousands of attendants (Kumārajīva 4, 16).

Ajanta Caves 1 and 2 depict *kinnaras* and *kinnarīs* in half-human and half-bird form (Ghosh)⁶, see Figures 1 and 2. In Figure 1, a *kinnara* is playing a flute and a *kinnarī* is either singing or dancing. In Figure 2, a *kinnara* is playing a *saroda*-like instrument and a *kinnarī* is also playing some instrument.

⁴ Also see his 1987 book on Jain iconography (Shah, *Jaina-Rūpa-Maṇḍana*).

⁵ “*vyantarāḥ kinnara-kimpuruṣa-mahoraga-gandharva-yakṣa-rākṣasa-bhūta-piśācāḥ*” (*Tattvārthasūtra* 4.11) (Umāsvāmī 153).

⁶ Also see Singh’s book on the Ajanta Caves (Singh).



Figure 1: *Kinnara* playing flute on the right and *kinnarī* singing or dancing on the left, Ajanta Cave 2, Maharashtra



Figure 2: *Kinnara* playing *saroda* on the right and *kinnarī* playing some instrument, Ajanta Cave 1, Maharashtra

In the Dilwara Jain temple complex, we can see *kinnara-kinnarī* pairs in three configurations. In Figure 3 both of them are dancing, in Figure 4 the male is playing a flute and the female is dancing and in Figure 5 both of them are playing instruments. In Figure 5 the *kinnarī* is playing a *vīṇā* (Indian lute). Interestingly, an ancient Indian stringed instrument is also known as the *kinnarī vīṇā* with an ostrich egg for body (Sachs 232).



Figure 3: Dancing *kinnara-kinnarī* pair, Lūṇavasahī, Dilwara Jain Temple, Rajasthan



Figure 4: On the right, a *kinnara* is playing a flute and on the left a *kinnarī* is dancing, Vimalavasahī, Dilwara Jain Temple, Rajasthan



Figure 5: On the right, a *kinnarī* is playing a *vīṇā* and on the left a *kinnara* is playing an instrument, Vimalavasahī, Dilwara Jain Temple, Rajasthan

One of the important features shown in Figures 3 to 5 is a curved floral or foliar arch or festoon issuing from the navel of these mythological birds. Such a foliar or arch is not seen in Figures 1 and 2. In literature, we have the mentions of *kinnaras* and *kinnarīs* but do not have any clear iconographic description of them.

It is important to note that *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) occupies a central place in Jain philosophy and is one of the five principal vows (*vratas*) that guide the soul on the path to liberation. Rooted in the Jain understanding that every living being (*jīva*), from the largest animal to the minutest organism, possesses a soul worthy of respect, this principle extends moral consideration to all forms of life. As Bhattacharya observes, "the minutest being is believed to have life, and the Jains are very careful not to destroy it" (Bhattacharya ix). Seen in this context, the numerous representations of animals within the temple complex may be understood as visual expressions of the Jain conception of the universality of *jīva*. Rather than functioning merely as decorative motifs, these images affirm the intrinsic value of all living beings and reinforce the ethical ideal of compassion toward every form of life.

Empathy in Sculpture

In the Dilwara and Ranakpur Jain temples, various philosophical, religious, and mythological motifs are conveyed through the carving of the stone. In Jain beliefs, non-violence is seen as one of the prominent virtues and Jain ascetics not only preach it but also follow its path in a staunch manner. Śrī Neminātha, the twenty-second *tīrthaṅkara*, renounced the worldly life just after listening to the fearful cries of different animals. This story is described in the *Triṣaṣṭīśalākāpuruṣacaritra* where the lives of sixty-three illustrious persons are described. The narration of the event goes as follows:

As Nemi went along, he heard the pitiful cries of animals and asked his charioteer, ‘What is this?’ though he knew well. The charioteer replied ‘Lord, do you not know? These various animals have been brought here to provide food for your marriage. Earth-dwellers, goats, et cetera and sky-dwellers, partridges, et cetera, belonging to village and forest, these will die, master. These are being watched by guards inside enclosures, crying out. For fear of life is a great fear of all.’

Then Nemi, a hero of compassion, said to his charioteer, ‘Drive my chariot to the place where these animals are.’ The charioteer did so, and the Blessed One saw many animals, their hearts terrified at losing their lives. Some were fastened by ropes on the neck, some on the feet, some had been thrown into cages and some had fallen into snares. Their faces upturned, their eyes pitiful, their bodies trembling, they looked at Nemi friendly from (his) appearance.

‘Protect! Protect!’ they said to Nemi, each in their own language. Neminātha, giving orders to the charioteer, had them released. When the animals had gone to their respective places, the Lord had the chariot turned back towards his own house. Śivā[devi], Samudravijaya, Kṛṣṇa, [Bala]Rāma, and others left their own conveyances and were in front of Nemi.

Śivā and Samudravijaya, their eyes filled with tears, said, ‘Why have you suddenly turned away from this festival?’ Nemi said ‘Just as these animals were bound by bonds, so we are bound by bonds of karma. Just as there was release from bondage for them, so I shall take initiation to make my own release from the bondage of karma – the sole source of happiness.’ (Triṣaṣṭiśālākāpuruṣacaritra 258-59).

The story of Neminātha’s renunciation is depicted on the corridor ceiling of Lūṇavasahī (Figures 6 and 7). Figure 6 shows different animals caged during the wedding of Neminātha and Rājīmatī. After the fearful cries of these animals were heard by Neminātha, they were freed. Neminātha’s decision to renounce the worldly life instead of getting married came with sadness to Rājīmatī, who experienced bad omens, e.g throbbing of her right eye and right arm and sudden tears in the eyes (Hemacandra 258); she is also depicted standing there. In Figure 7 on the very left side, Neminātha is shown as a *tīrthaṅkara* in *kāyotsarga mudrā* (posture abandoning the physical activity) and being worshipped by kings and celestial beings.



Figure 6: Animals during the episode of marriage of Neminātha and Rājīmatī, Lūṇavasahī, Dilwara Jain Temple, Rajasthan



Figure 7: Renunciation of Neminātha, Lūṇavasahī, Dilwara Jain Temple, Rajasthan

Homage to Great Deeds

It is interesting to see that in the Jain temples of Dilwara and Ranakpur, elephants are honored and given regard for bringing marble stones on their back. A separate complex, known as the *Hastisālā* (elephant shelter), is created to commemorate the elephants that transported the marble used in the construction of the temple. This remarkable feature acknowledges the indispensable role these animals played in making such an extraordinary architectural achievement possible. It is a unique example in Indian temple architecture, as the animals involved in the construction process are themselves honored through sculptural representation. The *Hastisālā* reflects the Jain emphasis on compassion toward all living beings. By commemorating the elephants, the monument recognizes their labor and endurance despite their non-human status, ensuring that their contribution is remembered by every visitor to the temple. As shown in Figure 8, the elephants are carved in marble and depicted carrying marble slabs on their backs, directly referencing their role in transporting construction materials. They are also adorned with a variety of ornaments. These decorative elements may reflect the care and affection with which their owners treated them, suggesting that the elephants were dressed in ornamental cloth and inexpensive gemstones during ceremonial or working occasions.



Figure 8: *Hastisālā*, Lūṇavasahī, Dilwara Jain Temple, Rajasthan

Figure 9 raises an important question: why is Pārśvanātha almost always depicted beneath the canopy of a multi-hooded serpent, whereas the other *tīrthaṅkaras* are generally identified only by their respective *lāñchana* (emblems) carved on the pedestal of the image? Why is the serpent shown in the act of protecting him, rather than simply serving as an identifying symbol? The answer lies in the narrative associated with Pārśvanātha and illustrates another example of how Jain art commemorates the rewards of virtuous karma. According to later Jain narrative tradition, Pārśvanātha encountered the ascetic Kamaṭha performing the *pañcāgni-tapas* (the austerity of five fires). Through his extraordinary insight, he perceived that a serpent (or, in some versions, a pair of serpents) was trapped inside one of the logs being fed into the fire. He ordered the log to be split open, thereby rescuing the serpent(s). In subsequent rebirths, the serpent became Dharaṇendra (and, in many accounts, the female serpent became Padmāvatī), while Kamaṭha was reborn as the demon Meghamālin. When Meghamālin later attempted to disturb Pārśvanātha's meditation by conjuring a violent storm, Dharaṇendra repaid this earlier act of compassion by sheltering him beneath his multi-hooded serpent canopy. When

Pārśvanātha was engaged in deep meditation, Meghamālin attempted to disrupt his spiritual practice by conjuring a violent storm. In response, Dharaṇendra and Padmāvatī came to his aid. Dharaṇendra spread his multiple hoods above Pārśvanātha's head to shield him from the storm, while Padmāvatī also assisted in his protection.⁷ Consequently, the multi-hooded serpent canopy became the defining iconographic attribute of Pārśvanātha. Rather than functioning merely as an identifying emblem, it commemorates the compassionate act performed in his previous life and the good karma that led Dharaṇendra to repay that kindness by protecting him.



Figure 9: Dharaṇendra, king of snakes, shelters the head of Śrī Pārśvanātha with his canopy, Ranakpur Jain Temple, Rajasthan

A contrasting example is found in the depiction of Kāliyā, the serpent king of the Yamuna River. According to the narrative, Kāliyā terrorized the inhabitants of the region by poisoning the waters of the river until he was subdued by Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Although Figures 9 and 10 both feature multi-hooded serpents within the same temple complex, they represent two fundamentally different moral narratives. The serpent canopy of Pārśvanātha commemorates Dharaṇendra's act of gratitude and protection, symbolizing the positive consequences of compassion and virtuous karma. In contrast, the image of Kāliyā represents the consequences of harmful actions, as his defeat by Kṛṣṇa serves as a reminder that wrongful conduct ultimately leads to suffering and punishment. By juxtaposing these two serpent figures, the sculptural framework of the temple presents contrasting ethical ideals. While Dharaṇendra is immortalized for repaying an act of kindness with loyalty and protection, Kāliyā exemplifies the fate of one whose harmful actions bring about defeat and humiliation. Together, these narratives reinforce the broader Indian religious understanding that actions inevitably bear

⁷ See Hemacandra's *Triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣacaritra*, Vol 5, 356-424.

consequences, with virtuous deeds leading to honor and remembrance, and harmful deeds resulting in adverse karmic outcomes.



Figure 10: *Kāliyā mardana* by Śrī Kṛṣṇa, Ranakpur Jain Temple, Rajasthan

Conclusion

Through the examples discussed above, this study has sought to demonstrate that the Ranakpur temple complex is not merely an architectural or sculptural monument but also a visual repository of Jain philosophy, ethical teachings, and religious narratives. The story of Neminātha, together with the depictions of singing and dancing birds, encourages ideals of compassion, non-violence, and respect for all forms of life. Likewise, the prominent representation of elephants acknowledges the labor and suffering endured by these animals during the construction of the temple. In doing so, the temple gives visibility to beings whose contributions are often overlooked and invites visitors to cultivate empathy toward all living creatures.

Finally, it is important to recall the Jain principle of *saptabhaṅgīnaya* (doctrine of seven-fold predication), which allows one to “make a specific assertion about any substance...and still leave room for other possible assertions,” thereby describing reality “in all of its possible aspects or modes” (K. L. Wiley 209). In the same spirit, the interpretations presented here are not intended to be definitive. Rather, they represent one possible way of understanding the presence and significance of animals within the Ranakpur temple complex, viewed through the lens of the Jain ideal of *ahimsā*. Other readings are equally possible, and the richness of the temple's sculptural program invites continued exploration from multiple perspectives.

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