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Speak Up

JAIN TĪRTHAS: THE PILGRIM PLACES IN JAIN TRADITION

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Jainism is one of the oldest and still-practiced religions in India. Like Brahmanism and Buddhism, *tīrthas* (pilgrimages) hold a significant importance in Jainism. In every religious tradition, something is needed for laypeople as well as ascetics to follow or to show the path to enlightenment, and also for spiritual upliftment. In this scenario, *tīrthas* play an important role in feeling the energy and spirituality of the place. This is a very common practice in this great Indic tradition.

The notion of *tīrtha* is significant throughout all Indian traditions, yet its role in Jainism stands out in particular. In Jain philosophy, *tīrtha* encompasses not only the religion but also the revered journey toward spiritual liberation. The *tīrthamkara* is regarded as the supreme spiritual guru/leader who founds the *tīrtha*. He is not only worshipped but also meditated upon. Essentially, a *tīrthamkara* is one who sets the path of dharma, guiding individuals toward enlightenment.

In Jainism, the concepts of *tīrtha* and *tīrthamkara* are closely interconnected, forming the core essence and spiritual foundation of the faith. Jain *ācāryas* have extensively discussed the concept of *tīrtha*, providing deep philosophical insights into its meaning and significance. Etymologically, the word *tīrtha* is derived from the idea of "crossing over", symbolizing a passage that leads one from worldly existence to spiritual liberation (*tīrthate anena iti tīrthaḥ* -Abhidhānarājendra Koṣa and Sthānaṅga Tīkā).

Types of Jain Tīrthas

In the Jain religious tradition, there are different types of *tīrthas* as follow:

1. **Kalyāṇaka Kṣetra:** These revered places mark significant milestones in a *tīrthamkara*'s life, including conception (*garbha*), birth (*janma*), initiation (*dīkṣā*), and attainment of omniscience (*kevalajñāna*). Examples include Ayodhya, popular as the birthplace (*janma-kalyāṇaka kṣetra*) of the first Tīrthamkara Ṛṣabhadeva, Champapuri as the place of all *kalyāṇakas* of the twelfth Tīrthamkara Vāsupūjya.
2. **Nirvāṇa Kṣetra:** These revered places are where *tīrthamkaras* or other revered ascetics attain *nirvāṇa* (emancipation). Prominent examples include Kailash, Girnar, and Sammed-shikhar, from where Ṛṣabhadeva, Neminātha, and the other twenty *tīrthamkaras* attained emancipation, respectively. Also, Mathura is revered as the *nirvāṇa kṣetra* of Jambūsvāmī.
3. **Atīśaya Kṣetra:** These places are revered for miraculous occurrences associated with temples or idols, enhancing their spiritual significance. Examples include Mahavirji, where an idol of Tīrthamkara Mahāvīra was found under a mound; and Shirpur, where a floating idol of Tīrthamkara Pārśvanātha is found, and is known as Antarikṣa Pārśvanātha.

Concept of Tīrthapaṭas

Often, the desire to embark on a pilgrimage is hindered by financial constraints, time limitations, or health concerns, preventing individuals from experiencing its spiritual benefits. Acknowledging these challenges, Jain *śreṣṭhīs* (businessmen), under the guidance and expertise of their guru, would have sacred pilgrimage sites artistically represented on cloth pieces. These depictions, known as *tīrthapaṭa* (cloth painting), serve as a meaningful way to connect with the essence of the pilgrimage without physically undertaking the journey. These are mostly famous in Western India. These *tīrthapaṭas* (cloth paintings) functioned as maps and places of worship, especially during the 18th and 19th centuries. These paintings were hung in temples or at designated locations for devotees to worship, serving as a visual representation of the sacred place for those who couldn't make the pilgrimage. There are many *tīrthapaṭas* available, like Śatruñjaya Tīrthapaṭa, Giranāra Tīrthapaṭa, Sammeda Śikhara Tīrthapaṭa, etc.



Significance of the Jain Tīrthas

The *tīrthas* are ever relevant due to their diverse significance as spiritual and ethical guides and preservers of ancient heritage through the ages. They can be categorized as:

- **Spiritual Significance:** These places inspire devotees to follow the core Jain principles of *ahimsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness), *brahmacarya* (celibacy), *anekāntavāda* (pluralistic viewpoint), and many others through the vibrant ambience, devotional activities, reflection of these values from sculptures, etc.
- **Historical and Cultural Significance:** Jain *tīrthas* preserve ancient architecture, iconography, scriptures, and traditions, contributing to India's rich heritage. Ranakpur is known for its art and iconographical depictions.
- **Ethical and Environmental Impact:** Many Jain pilgrimage sites promote sustainable living, vegetarianism, and ecological conservation. For example, Palitana is known as the first vegetarian town in the world.

This highlights the significant role that *tīrthas* play in our lives. With these ideas in mind, Paul Dundas' words seem particularly insightful –

Pilgrimage, like the performance of the *sāmāyika* contemplative exercise, enables a Jain lay person to become an ascetic for a short period.

Paul Dundas, *The Jains*, p.218
