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Speak Up

SAMANAM, SRAMANA: THE REVIVAL OF TAMIL JAINS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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Jainism has influenced our life in the past and our literature owes many of its treasures to the Jains whose love of learning, culture and humanity has brightened many a page in the History of our motherland. The full extent of our debt to this great community has not yet been realised and several years of patient study and research may be required before we are anywhere near its realisation. But we may say generally that a knowledge of Jainism is a *sine qua non* for a correct and thorough understanding of some of our classics.

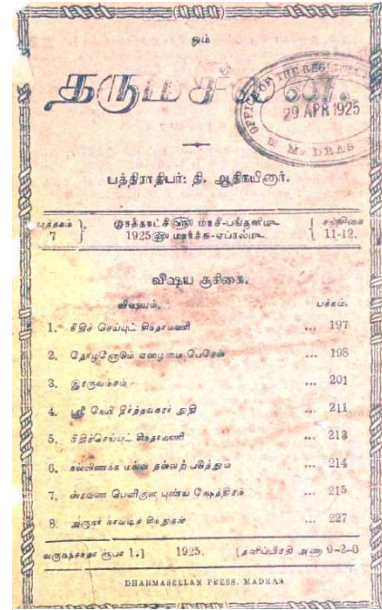
- S. Vaiyapuri Pillai, Sri Puranam (p. ix, 1943)

Jainism (*samanam* in Tamil, loaned from Prakrit *samaṇam*) in Tamil Nadu has a long history that dates back to 3rd century BCE. The hundreds of Tamil inscriptions found across Tamil Nadu in Jain caves and temples narrate the history of life of Jains in Tamil Nadu. The influence of Jain philosophy and culture nurtured Tamil language and literature through grammar, genres of literature, art and architecture. However, this vast influential Jain culture was restricted to Tamil Jains until the end of the second millennia. Most of the Jain monuments and Jain temples were left unnoticed by the public. As the British government established the Archaeological Survey of India in the mid-19th century, these once-ignored monuments and temples came to light, bringing the Tamil Jains to the front and some of them also got involved in editing Tamil Jain texts in the late 19th century.

Printing and publishing offered significant advantages to Tamil Jains. Establishing a printing press and dedicated associations for its benefit at the beginning of the 20th century ushered them into a new era of Jain history. Hence, this period can be termed the revival of Tamil Jainism.



Adinayinar, a Tamil Jain, who lived in Madras (now Chennai), established a press in 1918 and started a monthly magazine *Dharmaseelan*. This magazine published articles focused on Jain philosophy, Tamil Jain literature in prose and poetry, demographic study of Jains and several other articles on general notions of life through a Jain perspective. Interestingly, in each magazine the editor provides details of the activities of two Jain associations that were established around the same time in the northern Tamil Nadu. One is “Arani Jain Brotherhood Society” (est. 1919) and the other is “Perani Jain Brotherhood Shatgram Society” (est. 1920). Arani is one of the important places for Jainism where the Arihantagiri Mutt is located. Every month the members of these societies would gather to discuss various topics of Jain philosophy and also the possible ways of spreading Jain principles among the community. In this effort, the Arani society mobilized Rs 2051 to establish a school for Jain studies in 1920 under the name “Jain Dharma Padshala.” We don’t have more details on activities of this school, however, further research is required for it. Apart from establishing a school, this society also published a few books on Tamil Jainism.



Dharmaseelan magazine front page (1925, vol.7:11,12)

A total of 18 associations were established in the 20th century for the upliftment of Tamil Jains and its culture (as per my to-date research). More than half of these were located in Chennai. This distinction requires our attention. Chennai (then Madras) has been a major hub for printing from the 19th century onwards. Although there was printing presses established in several parts of Tamil Nadu, Chennai provided more facilities other than just printing. Although Jains in Tamil Nadu mostly live concentrated in the northern parts of Tamil Nadu (Tiruvannamalai, Villupuram, Velur, Chengalpattu, Kanchipuram and Chennai) and a very few in further south (Thanjavur), most of them moved to Chennai for work. So, the educated, settled, enthusiastic, passionate Tamil Jains started these associations individually or as a group of three or four. A. Chakravarti Nainar, Jeevabandhu T.S. Sripal were some of the great scholars who participated in the establishment of these associations.

“Jain Literature Research Society,” a dedicated association, was established in late 1950s for publishing rare Tamil Jain texts, translating and publishing essential Prakrit texts into Tamil and to invest needful effort to protect Jain monuments. A monumental effort to protect a Jain temple in Erode was undertaken by this group in 1958. In 1965, a question on protecting minority religious monuments was raised in the Madras State Assembly meeting by an association member due to which Chief Minister K. Bhaktavatsalam responded positively and gave orders for the protection of those temples. However, Jain monuments were often



neglected among minority religious heritage sites. Highlighting this point, Jeevabandhu Sripal wrote, (translated from Tamil),

I worried that even though Jains have composed grammars, didactic literature, thesauri, and other great literary works for Tamil language and culture since ancient times, the state assembly members did not even think about protecting Jaina caves and ancient Jaina temples. Tamilakam forgot Jainism. Therefore, I must take effort now. (Vijayamangalam, 1965, p. 3)

With thousands of Tamil Jains' signatures, a letter was submitted to the concerned minister requesting protection of ancient Jain temples. This marked the beginning of a change that was yet to come. In light of this effort, the government agreed to safeguard Jain monuments. This transformation led Tamils to become more conscious of Jain heritage across Tamil Nadu.

“The Jaina Youth Forum” was established in July 1974 by six founding members, with the primary goals of promoting social development and advancing religious awareness. This association was established on the 2500th year of Mahavir Nirvana. Since then, they have published over 100 books and actively participated in various social activities. *Mukkudai*, a monthly magazine, both in Tamil and English, is published by them for over 50 years. Members of this association are also actively involved in the *Ahimsa Nadai* (Ahimsa Walk), which has been organized every month by Tamil Jains since 2014 for more than 12 years. The walk has now crossed the milestone of 100 events. The objective of this walk is “discovering protecting, preserving, safe guarding the abandoned Jaina heritage sites, monuments, hills, dilapidated ancient temples, Tirthankara images from vandalism, destruction, quarrying, conversion and theft.” Ahimsa Walkers from different places – villages, towns, and cities – travel to a designated location, usually a village near a heritage site. They walk through the village streets, inviting local people, students, and teachers to join the Ahimsa Walk. By doing this, they create awareness about the Jaina monuments and historical sites in particular.

The other major activities of “The Jaina Youth Forum” include:

- Conducting lectures in the remembrance of great people who dedicated their lives for Tamil Jainism
- Organizing meetings that help youngsters to familiarize with Jain religion and philosophy
- Praising scholars who work for the development of Tamil Jainism
- Protecting Jain manuscripts

It is visible to everyone that there is awareness regarding the Jain monuments among Tamils at present. This gradual development – from neglect to awareness – took place because of the efforts invested by Tamil Jains since the early 20th century.
