

## Brief History of Jainism in Madurai

By the close of 4<sup>th</sup> century BC., the Mauryan King **Chandragupta** and a group of Jain ascetics led by **Sruthakevalin Bhadrabahu**, migrated to **Sravanabelagola in Karnataka**, anticipating a severe famine in their country. Here, they started spreading the gospel of the **Tirthankaras**. Subsequently, after the death of Chandragupta and Bhadrabahu, their disciples moved south to the Chola and Pandya countries possibly in the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. The early Brahmi inscriptions found in Madurai, Pasumpon and Tirunelveli Districts prove beyond doubt the antiquity of Jainism in Tamilnadu much earlier than the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.

There are many natural caverns spread in all of Tamilnadu which once served as the abodes of Jaina monks. These caves are found amidst picturesque surroundings where the monks lived in splendid isolation engaging themselves in contemplation and religious pursuits. Some of the main Jain caves found in and around Madurai are **Mangulam, Anaimalai, Arittapatti, Alagarmalai, Keelavalavu, Thiruvathavur, Varichiyur, Karungalakkudi, Thirupparankundram, Muthupatti, Kongarpuliangulam, Mettupatti, and Vikramangalam**. All these places are about 8kms. to 30kms. These caves represent the earliest lithic monuments in this region containing the earliest epigraphic records in Brahmi characters that are from 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC to 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. They also provide authentic evidence of the early spread of Jainism in Tamilnadu. Jainism gained momentum, both at the royal and rural levels. During the early 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, Gnanasambandar, the great Sivaite and Devaram hymnist, caused set back to Jainism and it supposedly resulted in thousands of Jaina followers being persecuted in Madurai. But Jainism did not lose its deep roots. We have number of evidences as inscriptions, sculptures and bas-reliefs which prove the rejuvenation of Jainism during 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. **Acchanandhi**, a well known Jain ascetic, was able to re-establish schools or Jaina pallis, in **Samananalai, Kalugumalai, Kurandi, Thirukkattampalli, Uthamapalayam, Aivarmalai, Anaimalai, Arittapatti, Avicheri and Perumpalli** and spread Jain religion.

### Salient features of the Caves

The natural caverns were made suitable for habitation by cutting stone beds in them. The beds were chiseled smooth with one side raised a little to serve as pillows. The overhanging rock was cut in the form of drip-ledge so as to prevent rain water from flowing into the cave shelters. Some of the caves have number of holes cut into the open rock surfaces in front which were possibly used for structural additions in front in the form of thatched roofs supported by wooden poles. All these caves had natural springs of water which catered to the basic needs of the ascetics. Even today, one can see the natural springs near the caves.

## Jains Contribution to Tamil Literature

The Jains have no doubt made rich and vast contributions in almost all fields of Tamil literature. Many of the rich Tamil literature works were written by Tamil Jains, such as the Nāladīyār, the Silappatikaram, the Manimekalai and the Civaka Cintamani. Three of the five great epics of Tamil literature are attributed to Jains. In the field of Tamil grammar the Jain scholars have put forth their best. The most ancient Tamil grammar 'Tholkappiyam' was written by a Jain author 'Tholkappiyar'. This grammar work consists of three great chapters-' Ezhuthu, Sol and Porul'. Each chapter consists of nine sections and 1612 sutras.