



ICONOGRAPHIC STUDY OF MAHAVIRA IMAGES IN MADHYA PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the historical and iconographic evolution of Jainism in Madhya Pradesh from its inception around the 6th century BCE to the medieval period. Jainism, which emphasizes non-violence and universal compassion, developed in response to the ritualistic and hierarchical Vedic traditions. Archaeological evidence of Jainism's early presence in Madhya Pradesh is sparse, with notable findings from the Gupta period onwards. Key discoveries include inscribed Tirthankara images from Vidisha, illustrating the spread and development of Jain art. During the Gupta era, Deogarh emerged as a significant center for Jain art, which continued to flourish under the Candellas in the 9th century, leading to the construction of iconic Jain temples at Khajuraho. The paper provides detailed iconographic analysis of various Mahavira images, highlighting their stylistic transitions from Kushan to Gupta periods and their continued evolution in medieval times. These artifacts underscore the rich artistic heritage and the socio-religious patronage that sustained Jainism in this region.

KEYWORDS: Jainism, Madhya Pradesh, Tirthankara Mahavira, Iconography, Gupta Era.

INTRODUCTION

Jainism, an ancient Indian religion emphasizing ahimsa (non-violence) and universal compassion, emerged circa 6th century BCE. This indigenous faith developed as a reaction against perceived ritualistic excesses and social stratification within later Vedic traditions. The term "Jainism" originates from "Jina," signifying "conqueror" – specifically, one who has mastered internal passions and achieved spiritual liberation. Adherents of this tradition are



known as Jainas. During the lifetime of Mahavira, a key figure in Jainism, its geographical reach remained limited to regions he traversed, encompassing parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Archaeological evidence on the spread of Jainism in Madhya Pradesh during the pre-Christian era is limited. Jaina literary tradition mentions the city Vidisha, where an image of Tirthankara Mahavira was worshipped as Jivantasvami. This image was reportedly brought by King Pradyota of Avanti from Roruka (Bajpai, 1984: 16). Unlike Buddhist remains, Jaina remains from the early centuries of the Christian era are not found in Madhya Pradesh. The discovery of three inscribed Tirthankara images from the Vidisha region provides the first evidence of Jainism during the early Gupta era in Madhya Pradesh, particularly in Vidisha. The pedestal inscription mentions Maharajadhiraja Ramagupta. A detailed iconographical study of these Jaina sculptures shows similarities with the Tirthankara and Buddhist images of Mathura, dating to the transitional period or early Gupta era.

During the later Gupta period, the Jaina art tradition continued, evidenced by the image of Parsvanatha carved during the reign of Kumargupta I in cave no. 20 of Udaigiri near Vidisha (Bajpai, 1984: 16-18). Deogarh became a significant center of Jaina art during the Gupta era. The history of Jainism after the Guptas is unclear, but evidence reappears during the Gurjara-Pratihara period. Under the Candellas, Jainism flourished around the ninth century, with the Jaina temples of Khajuraho and the sculptural and inscriptional evidence indicating a prosperous period. During this time, Jainism prospered and Jaina art developed under royal patronage (Bajpai, 1977: 81-84). In the medieval period, trading communities also supported this religious ideology, leading to the construction of numerous sculptures and temples.

Mahavira was the son of Siddhartha and Trisala, leaders of the Jnatr clan of the Kshatriyas of Kundapura (Kundagram), possibly a suburb of ancient Vaishali. Also known as Vardhamana, he was the twenty-fourth and last tirthankara of Jainism. The exact birthplace of Mahavira is uncertain, with historians identifying three possible locations in Bihar: Kundagram in Vaishali district, Lachhuar in Jamui, and Kundalpur in Nalanda. Most modern historians agree that Basokund was his birthplace. Traditionally, Kundalagrama in ancient Vaishali is regarded as his birthplace, though its exact location is unknown. Mahavira's symbol is the lion, and he is

associated with Yaksha Matanga and Yakshi Siddhayika. He attained nirvana at Pavapuri. The earliest representation of the Jina in Indian art, found in Mathura, dates to the Kushan period. From the Kushan period onward, images of Mahavira have been discovered across India with various iconic details.

This overview of Jainism history includes an examination of the iconographic details of some images of the twenty-fourth Tirthankara Mahavira from Madhya Pradesh.

The earliest Mahavira image from Madhya Pradesh is located at Sira Pahari, near Nachna. This site is known for a Gupta period Siva shrine. Within this temple complex, a group of Gupta age Jaina sculptures is preserved. Among them is a seated Tirthankara with a large halo and flying gandharvas on each side. The Tirthankara is flanked by standing chamara-dhara (flywhisk bearers). The head and body treatment of the Jaina figure is similar to Mathura sculptures of the fourth century. The pedestal features miniature lions at the ends and a dharmachakra in the center. This seated Tirthankara likely represents Mahavira with the lion symbol. The style reflects a transition from typical Kushan types to the classical Gupta idiom. The Mahavira image is a beautiful specimen, with the face especially well-modeled, dating to the 3rd - 6th century AD.

The Raipur Mahant Ghasidas Memorial Museum in Chhattisgarh holds a notable white sandstone Mahavira sculpture from Karitalai region, Jabalpur (Fig. 1). The image, measuring 115 cm x 65 cm, depicts the Tirthankara seated in padmasana in Dhyanamudra on a high pedestal. The hair is curly with an usnisa in the center. The image has elongated earlobes touching the shoulders and a clear facial expression. The srivatsa is present on the chest. The top and right portions of the prabhamandala and other pratiharyas are broken and lost; however, miniature representations of some Jainas suggest the image was intended to be a Chaturvimsati-patta. The pedestal shows a chakra and a lion (lanchana) in the center between the lions representing the simhasana. Below the chakra and lanchana is a reclining lady figure, possibly the image donor. The pedestal also features miniature representations of Matanga and Siddhayika, the yaksha and yakshi of Mahavira, at its ends. This image is stylistically dated to the 11th - 12th century AD.

At Khajuraho, nine images of Tirthankar Mahavira (Fig. 2) have been found, dated to the 10th-12th century A.D. All images of Mahavira feature lanchana, but yaksha and yakshi are present

in six images. Sarvanubhuti and Ambika are the most commonly depicted yaksha and yakshi. Among these sculptural specimens of Mahavira, the Khajuraho museum displays two notable images. In both images, the composition of space is integrated, and the steles of Tirthankaras are highly decorated. One of these images is partially damaged, with the head of the Jina missing. In both cases, the Jina is seated in padmasana posture (dhyanamudra) with meditative eyes, on a decorated circular cushion placed on a throne with a cover or mat draping down in front. The cushions are adorned with floral motifs, and the center of the hanging mats depicts the decorative kirtimukha, commonly found on the top of steles from the period. Both Tirthankaras bear a stele figure and exhibit sophisticated carving. The facial expressions of the mulanayakas are clear. The Jainas have elongated ear-lobes, and their hair is arranged in schematic curls with an usnisa. The lion, the lanchana of the lord, is depicted in front of the auspicious wheel in the center of the lower part of the pedestal of both images. In one case, four-armed yaksha and yakshi figures are carved at both corners of the pedestal. Stylistically, both images are assignable to the 11th-12th century A.D.

The Chanderi museum houses three images of Tirthankara Mahavira recovered from the Budhi Chanderi region. The first image, made of buff sandstone, measures 102x30x21 cm. Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara, is depicted standing in kayotsarga-mudra on a tri-ratha simhasana. The stele behind the head is missing, and his right hand is broken. His head features curly hair, and his cognizance, the lion, is depicted on the pedestal. The srivatsa adorns his chest. Male chauri-bearers and kneeling devotees stand near his feet on either side. His Sasanadevatas and devi are shown on the right and left lateral projections, with kneeling devotees near their feet. The second image, measuring 212x58x38 cm and made of red sandstone, also depicts Mahavira standing in kayotsarga-mudra on a tri-ratha simhasana. His head features curly hair, and his cognizance, the lion, is depicted on the pedestal. The srivatsa adorns his chest. Male chauri-bearers and kneeling devotees stand near his feet on either side. The prabhamandala is flanked by male attendants, although the attributes in their hands are no longer discernible. The halo is topped by a tri-chatra, flanked by flying vidyadharas carrying garlands and accompanied by their consorts. A now obliterated seated figure of a drummer once appeared above the parasol. The lateral projections of the pedestal bear seated images of yaksha-yakshi on the right and left, respectively.

The third image of Mahavira, measuring 110x59x47 cm and made of red sandstone, is broken from the knee, with only the lower part remaining. The image was originally life-size. His cognizance, a lion galloping to the left, helps identify the Tirthankara as Mahavira. He is shown standing on a tri-ratha lion throne. His yaksha-yakshi, Matanga and Siddhayika, are shown in lalitasana on the lateral projections of the pedestal. The heads of the kneeling devotees near his feet are missing. Additionally, there are some sandstone images of Tirthankara Mahavira currently kept in the Chhappan Mahal complex (museum) of the Mandu fort in district Dhar. These images are very badly damaged, making it difficult to trace their iconic details. However, in all cases, the Tirthankara is seated in padmasana posture (dhyanamudra).

BRONZE IMAGES FROM STATE MUSEUM, BHOPAL

In 1992, a hoard of eighty-seven Jaina bronzes was unearthed by a farmer while ploughing a field in Bhopawar village in Sardarpur tahsil of Dhar district. The bronzes date to the 10th – 11th centuries and recall a glorious age of pilgrimages and temple building actively organized by the great Jaina Gachhas under the benevolent care and encouragement of the Paramara rulers are often gratefully acknowledged in the inscription of Jain temples of Bhojpur, Gyaraspur, Un, Dhar and Mandu from 10th to 13th centuries. The collection of eighty seven bronzes is unique in that images of twenty-four tirthankaras from Lord Adinatha to Lord Mahavira (Fig. 3) are sequentially complete and largely intact.

MAHAVIRA IMAGES OF MADHYA PRADESH FROM FOREIGN MUSEUMS

An image of Tirthankara Mahavira (Fig. 4) is housed in the Rubin Museum of Art, New York. The image measures 114.3 x 68.6 x 30.5 cm and is made of red sandstone. In this depiction, Mahavira is standing as mulanayaka, seated in padmasana posture (dhyanamudra) with meditative eyes, on a decorated circular cushion placed on a throne with a draping cover in front. The cushion features floral motifs. The center of the hanging mat displays a decorative kirtimukha, commonly found in the top portion of stele sculptures from the period. The Tirthankara has a stele figure and sophisticated carving. The facial expression of the mulanayaka is more lucid. The Jaina has elongated earlobes and his hair is arranged in schematic curls with an usnisa. He bears the srivatsa symbol on the center of his chest, resembling the shape of a diamond. The abdomen is well represented, especially compared to

other Jaina figures from this region. The lion, the lanchana of the lord, is depicted on the triratha pedestal. In the middle of the stele, the mulanayaka is flanked by two regal chauri bearers, standing in the divanga posture and half-turned towards the saintly teacher. They are positioned over a crouching elephant. Their left hand is in katyavalambita posture, and the right hand holds a fly-whisk. They wear deeply incised loincloths, short and elaborate jewelry including hara, armllets, wristlets, and ekavali.

The mulanayaka features a leaf-shaped circular siraschakra, with its tips touching the inner border and a beaded outer border. A similar design of the siraschakra is seen in Jaina sculptures. Above the head of the mulanayaka, a trilinear chatra is depicted. The tri-chatra is flanked by figures of flying vidyadharas with garlands, accompanied by their consorts. The triple parasol is surmounted by a drummer figure, flanked by elephants with riders. The right side of the upper portion of the rectangular stele is significantly damaged. Parallel to the vidyadhara couples, both sides of the upper part of the stele are decorated with miniature figures of Tirthankaras, positioned one above another.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Madhya Pradesh is a significant center for Jainism in India. Evidence from Durjanpur, Gyaraspur, Ujjain, and other sites indicates that Jainism dates back to the pre-Gupta period. The images of four Tirthankaras—Adinath, Neminath, Parsvanath, and Mahavira—are especially prominent from early times. Among these, images of Mahavira are infrequently found until the later historical period. However, they are more common compared to earlier times. Iconographical studies of Mahavira images from Madhya Pradesh show that most are in a seated posture with dhyana mudra. The Tirthankara is typically seated on a high pedestal with a lion emblem. A systematic investigation is required to address the rarity of Mahavira images in this region.



Fig.1. Tirthankara Mahavira from Mahant Ghasidas Memorial Museum of Chhattisgarh.

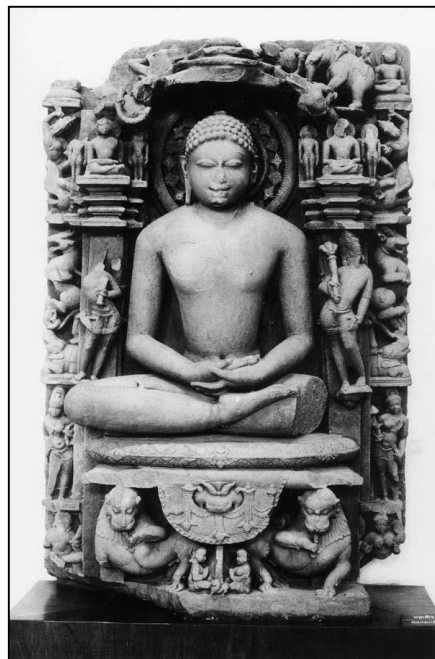


Fig. 2. Tirthankara Mahavira from Khajuraho Museum.



Fig. 3. Tirthankara Mahavira 11th Century AD (Bronze), State Museum, Bhopal.

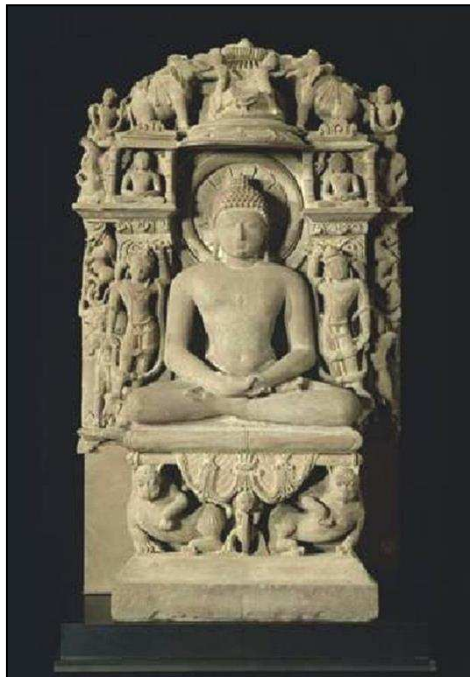


Fig. 4. Tirthankara Mahavira from Rubin Museum of Art, New York.



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