



Research Paper

Chitharal Malai Kovil - A Study

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ABSTRACT

The Chitharal Jain monuments presently called as Chitharal Malai kovil are the ruins of Jain's Training Centre is small rocky hills called the "Thirucharanattu Malai" situated in a small village called Chitharal. The place is a scenic beauty and is very excellent place. Chitharal is 7km from Marthandam, 55 km from Kanyakumari, and 36km from Nagercoil. To reach the Monument in hill top, one has to walk 800 meters for around 10 to 20 minutes in the steep steps built in the hill. From the top of this hill, you can explore the scenic beauty of rivers, coconut fields, churches and buildings.

Received 25 August, 2021; Revised: 07 September, 2021; Accepted 09 September, 2021 © The author(s) 2021. Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

Vilavancode is a taluk located in Kanyakumari district, TamilNadu, India. The headquarters of the taluk is the town of Vilavancode. The taluk was among several in Thiruvananthapuram district that with the passage of the states reorganization Act of 1956 were transformed from Thiruvananthapuram district, Travancore-cochin state to the newly created Kanyakumari district of Madras state. Vilavancode taluk was part of the princely state Travancore kingdom, the latter which subsequently became part of the then Travancore-Cochin state part of the states reorganization act 1956 aligned state boundaries on linguistic affiliations.¹

Chitharal Jain Monuments

The Chitharal Jain monuments also known as Chitharal Malai Kovil. Chitharal cave temple or Bhagavathai temple, are situated on the Thiruchanattu Malai near Chitharal village in Vilavancode in Kanyakumari District. Chitharal hills are locally known as Chokkanthoongi known as Thirucharanathupalli the abode of Jain monks belonging to Digambara sect.²

The historical ruins of Chitharal Jain monuments stand as vestiges of Jain settlements in Chitharal a small hamlet in Kanyakumari. Earlier, the place was known as Thirucharanathupalli, which served as the serene abode of several Digambar Jain monks. The reason behind the Jain influences in this part of the state was Pallava King in Mahendravarman I, who was a follower of Jainism. The king was famed for leading many such constructions, particularly rock-cut sculptures in cave temples.³

The village is popular for a cave atop a hillock that features rock cut images of attendant deities and Jain Tirthankaras. These carvings date back to the 9th century and are considered archaeologically significant. Amongst several exquisite rock cut sculptures found in the cave, the prominent one is an image of Goddess Dharmadevi. The cave was converted into a goddess temple during the 13th century.⁴

The signboards to Chitharal, a small village near Marthandam in Kanyakumari district, are, at best, confusing "the shadows" are long and there is a nip in the air when we reach Marthandam, about 7km. from Chitharal. Finally, a winding, weathered ribbon of a road that goes through lush paddy fields, lotus ponds and green plantations of rubber and plantain takes us to Chitharal and malai kovil. This hills are enveloped in mist and serenity at 7a.m. Cashew nut trees and country almonds line both sides of paved path. Deep red xenora and fluffy pink flowers of touch-me-nots, resembling cotton candy, dot the path and add a dash of brilliant colour to the predominantly green and brown landscape.⁵

Chitharal Jain Rock Cut Temple

Chitharal is located about 45 kilometers away from Kanyakumari. It is famous for the Rock Cut Temple. Hillock at Chitharal has a cave containing Rock Cut sculptures of Tirthankaras and attendant deities carved inside and outside dating back to 9th century A.D. King Mahendravarman I was responsible

for the Jainism influence in this region. It was converted into Bagavathy temple in the 13th century A.D. Cars and Vans go upto the foot of the hill. One has to walk for about ten minutes to reach the temple. The Jain images have been preserved by the central Archeological survey of India.⁶

Chitharal Malai Kovil

Chitharal temple, also known as Chitharal Malai Kovil. Chitharal cave temple situated in Thiruchanathumalli Hills. Rock Cut Cave Temple architecture, constructed by Jains during 9th century. It was a Jain temple and after converted into a Hindu temple. Chitharal temple is a goddess temple dedicated to Bhagavathy devi. Thirucharanathumalai is a hillock located in Chitharal village near marthandam.⁷ On the top of the hill under a path that seems naturally hanging there in a temple with Mandapam, Corridor and balipeetam with a Madappalli. There are three sanctums housing Mahavira, Parswanatha and Padmavathi Devi. The idol of Bagavathi Devi by Sri Moolam Thirunal, king of Travancore in 1913. Above the hanging path, there is a dilapidated tower on a rock on the 9th century are also found here. It was a Jain Training Centre for both males and females in those days. Jain monuments in Chitharal is a Jain culture and civilization seemed to have disappearing from the world.⁸

History

There are two monuments. The earlier rock cut Jain structure of beds with inscriptions and drip ledges in the earliest Jain monuments in the southern most part of India which was from first century BC to sixth century A.D. The temple monuments were likely built digambara Jains in the 9th century when the region was under influence in this region was due to the king Mahendravarman I (610-640) A.D. According T.A. Gopinatha Rao who visited the monuments in 1920-21, the inscription on the Southern side says a Jain priestess called Gunandagi- Kuraltigal, the disciple of Arattaneml- Bhatariyar of Tiruchchanam malai with a metallic lamp stand and a golden flower during the 28th year of reign of Vikramaditya Varaguna Pandya. It was a Jain training center for both males and females in past. The inscription is in old Tamil script known as Vetteluthu.⁹

The Travancore Archaeological Series says that Tiruchcharanatta malai, the name of the hills, means the hills of Charanas. Charanas means Jain ascetics which were living on the hills. The votive images on the rock with inscription under each of it names an ascetic or person who carved it.¹⁰

Description

A natural cavern formed by over hanging by over hanging rock has a bas relief sculptures of Jain Tirthankaras which were carved in later phase. The relief of Parshwanatha and Padmavathi is standing figures canopied by multi hooded cobra and with attendant figures of Yaksha. The figures seated in ardha- Padmasana pose in each niches with three tiered parasol in that of other Tirthankaras. There are three standing figures of Mahavira with three tiered parasol, Chhatratrayi chaitya with a tree above it and attendant figures. There is another female figure of Ambika in niche next to it. It has attendant figures including two children and a lion mount. All major niches has flying figures of Vidyadharas or worshippers. Each of this figures has a short inscription below the sent mentioning a name of door and place in Vatteluthu Tamil script. Based on these inscription, it is known that the site was under control of Jain atleast till middle of 13th century.¹¹

The monuments are reached by roughly hewn steps in rocks and the narrow entrance between them. On the top of the hill, there in a cave temple with mandapa, a varandandh corridor and a balipeetam with a kitchen (maddapalli) which is carved into a natural overhanging rock facing the west. It has three sanctums which houses the Tirthankara in middle, goddess in the right and Parshwanatha on the left. The gopuram of the central shrine is destroyed possibly due to lightning. The temple was built in medieval period. This is another temple like structure (Vimana) on the top of the hill which is reached by climbing few steps. There is a natural pond few steps downwards. Around 13th century the cave temple was converted into Hindu temple of Bhavathi. It is known by the Tamil script inscription of the entrance of the Mandapa dated to 475KE (1300A.D) which says Narayanan, Tamil Appalla Varaiyan of Rajavallapuram in the Kil Vembanadu donated some money for the expense of Bhagavathi temple.¹²

II. CONCLUSION

The Chitharal hill temple is very famous. It is located in the southern district of Kayakumari District. Inscription said that Jain monks lived here. This is a cave temple in early period. It is presently called Malayala Bagavathi Koil. In every Sunday people came here and worshipped Amman. The boulders and rubber estates are plenty. The temple was created by rummage rocks. This is a great example of ancient Tamil sculpture.

END NOTES

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