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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**THE EARLY PANDYA'S MOST STRIKING MURAL PAINTINGS OF SITTANNAVASAL IN TAMIL  
COUNTRY THROUGH EPIGRAPHS**

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**Abstract**

The Sangam literature mention the technique of mural art, colours used and the common motifs painted. The Mural art, a form of wall art done on walls of rock cut, temple walls, and caves, has been prevalent in Tamil Country from the beginning of the Common Era. The Sittannavasal rock cut Jain caves were excavated in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE by the Early Pandya, which have some of the most exciting murals as Ajantha caves seen. The Early Pandyas were equally excavated cave temples and they continued the art of wall murals. This paper connotes the murals at Sittannavasal were made under the patronage of the Early Pandya Kings and by the artistic painters of the Pandya Country.

**Keywords:** Acharya, Tirthankara, petroglyphs, garbh graha, ardha mandapa, mukha mandapa and dhyana

**Introduction**

Right from the prehistoric ages, humans have left their mark on cave walls and rocks in the form of petroglyphs and paintings. When they settled down as a community, they started to paint on pottery. Their homes were decorated with wall art. Most of us are aware of the effervescent murals of the world-famous Ajanta caves in the Aurangabad district in Maharashtra State. The Sangam literature mention the technique of

mural art, colours used and the common motifs painted. Very few murals have survived the vagaries of time and nature. The Mural art, a form of wall art done

on walls of rock cut, temple walls, and caves, has been prevalent in Tamil Country from the beginning of the Common Era, at the very least. The art requires a layer of lime paste or lime mortar over which, organic and mineral based colours<sup>1</sup> are used to fill in the drawings.

The Sittannavasal rock cut Jain caves were excavated in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE by the Early Pandya, which have some of the most exciting murals as Ajantha caves seen. The paintings<sup>2</sup> at the Jain rock cut cave at Sittannavasal also known as the Arivar Kovil. The paintings are said to be as equal to the vibrant Ajanta paintings, yet they are hardly known. Sittannavasal cave paintings<sup>3</sup> are situated on top of a

rock mountain in the Pudukkottai District in Tamil Nadu.

The Pallavas<sup>4</sup> ruled Thondaimandalam of Tamil Country till the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The frescos at the Kanchipuram, Kailasanathar Temple built by Narasimhavarman II Pallava, are a repository of some of the finest wall frescos of the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The content painted in this temple is that of Lord Siva and several Gods of the Hindu pantheon. The entire sandstone surface was covered with layers of thick lime plaster.<sup>5</sup> The plaster has crumbled with age, but the areas where, the paintings are visible show the Pallavas mastery over the art. The Chalukyas of Badami previously mastery as Vatapi was also known for their temple wall frescos.

The Early Pandyas under Kadungon had regained their power over Madurai region and establish the Pandya country by overthrowing the Kalabhras. The Early Pandyas were equally excavated cave temples and they continued the art of wall murals. The murals at Sittannavasal were made under the patronage of the Early Pandya Kings and by the artistic painters of the Pandya Country.

The Sittannavasal rock-cut Jain caves were excavated in the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E.<sup>6</sup> during the Early Pandya rule. The rock cut caves were cut out into the natural cavern type structure of the rock face. This was an important Jain centre for many centuries. It must be remembered that Jainism spread to Tamil Country including extreme southern tip of Tamil Country during the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries B.C.E.<sup>7</sup> The King Chandragupta Maurya had converted to Jainism and had travelled to Shravanabelagola along with a large number of Jain ascetics.

Like the Pallavas the *ardha mandapa* pillars give the Early Pandya appearance or style. The *garbh graha* and *ardha mandapa* are simple in style and west facing. It is the splash of colours that hits the eye, leaving the viewer mesmerised and searching for more paintings.

Inscriptions on the southern side of the *ardha mandapa* wall mention the history of the temple. The temple walls, pillars, and roofs were decorated with murals during the reign of the Early Pandya King, Srimara Srivallabha, also known as Avanipasekhara

(815-862 CE). The murals were renovated and embellished and a *mukha mandapa* was added in front of the cave temple by a Jain Acharya named Ilan Gautaman<sup>8</sup> from Madurai region. The lintel of the outer verandah is the remains of the original *mukha mandapam*.

The rectangular *ardha mandapa* has two broad simple pillars and two pilasters. The beam above these pillars has corbels that give some design to the otherwise plain pillars. The outer wall on the right side has a seventeen line Tamil inscription of the Early Pandya. The inscriptions have helped to trace the history of these rock cut temple and its paintings. The walls, pillars and roof of this *ardha mandapa* have the most exquisite surviving murals of the Early Pandyas.

The upper portions of the pillars have dazzling coloured murals. The central pillars have a dancing maiden each. These maidens give the appearance of dancing in full flow and welcoming visitors at the same time. The outlines of these figures are visible along with the facial expressions and the jewels that adorn their entire body. Ochre (the brown in color) is the most pronounced colour used for these figures. The beam area between the Pillars contains corbels. These have striking colours with blue, green<sup>9</sup> mustard, pink, brown and black being the predominant shades. Attractive lotus and swan motifs besides the floral creepers and geometric designs striking the attention of every one.

Just a few remnants of murals remain on the other faces of the pillars. On the side face of the southern pillar is a fading painting of two people. The outline of one makes it clear that those persons must be the members of the royal family. Perhaps they may be the Early Pandya King Avanipasekhara Srivallabha, leading his queen to see the Madurai Acharya, Ilan Gautaman. There are evident signs of vandalism on the surface. This was done soon after the completion of the painting as the vandal scribbled his name in the script of that era. There was a depiction of an ascetic besides the Pandya King and Queen.<sup>10</sup>

The niches on the two ends of the *ardha mandapa* have deep bas reliefs. The northern niche has a figure of a Jain Acharya seated in a meditative pose. There is a single umbrella over his head that denotes

that he is not a Jain Tirthankara. As per Jain iconography, a Jain Tirthankara has three acharyas or umbrellas over the head. The southern niche has the image of Parshvanath, the 23rd Tirthankara. He is also appeared in *dhyana* or meditation pose. The five-hooded Naga forms a canopy over his head.

The roof of the *ardha mandapa* contains vibrant paintings. The paintings at the corners have deep red as the background. There are green circles with lotus flowers in a bond spread through the area. The red colour stands out as very attractive and gives the effect of a heavenly carpet<sup>11</sup>. Only portions of the mural remain as the lime plaster has peeled off. The most striking part of the roof is the central area, as a considerable portion has survived to reveal a lotus pond with abundant nature and some human figures. The more attractive at the lotus pond, with the more alive it becomes. The pond has a green hue. Fish swimming<sup>12</sup> in between the leaves and flowers.

The Lotus pond is not a depiction of just a beautiful pond and nature and it is also associated with the Jain tradition<sup>13</sup> of Samavasarana, when a Tirthankara attains 'kaivalya gyan'. Jainism is an ancient Indian religion that focuses on the attainment of 'Nirvana' or the liberation of the soul. The Tirthankaras hold the most important place amongst the followers of this Jain faith. Here it is interesting to know the Jain tradition as per Jain traditions, there are five important events in the life of a Jain Acharya for attaining enlightenment.

These are birth, renunciation, realisation (kaivalya gyan), first sermon and finally *nirvana* or the liberation of the soul. The first sermon is to be given in an audience hall called the *samavasarana*. Celestial beings, humans, birds, animals, fish all come as an audience to listen to the enlightened discourse. It is this broad spectrum audience of the samavasarana that has been so well displayed on the roof and extended to the beam and pillars.

The Central area of the roof depicts this lotus pond in full natural glory. In one area, a single Bhavya is depicted collecting lotus flowers along with the stalks. The Bhavya is immersed in the beauty of these

heavenly flowers. The painting<sup>14</sup> shows the lotus flower in all its forms, along with the leaves.

Not far from this Bhavya are two more good souls collecting lotus flowers and preparing to hear the discourse of their lord. The skin tones of these beings are distinctly different with one as brown and the other as orange. The description of the pond is very beautiful and it is full of life. The swans are happy, and the fish look so real that you can imagine them glide near your feet. The big animals such as the tusker elephant and the buffaloes<sup>15</sup> are enjoying the cool water. The swans and the ducks are a delight to see. On the whole, this part of the roof is mesmerizing and a real masterpiece.

The architecture of the rock cut temple states that the sanctum is a low roofed square area with the west-facing wall having the bas relief of three ascetics in a meditative posture. The first two from the left are Tirthankaras as they have three umbrellas above their heads. The third ascetic is an Acharya. This bas relief appears to be as old as the original cave temple and therefore predates the murals.

The *garbh graha* is a dark palace as the doorway is small and therefore prevents light from entering. The roof has a sculpted wheel with hub and axle, representing the 'dharma chakra' or the wheel of law. This sanctum has a remarkable roof that becomes visible with the help of some artificial light such as a torch. The light will expose the most intricate patterns with red as the base colour. The roof design looks like a carpet with striped borders and ropes that create geometric patterns in the form of interwoven squares and circles. The room is always dark and therefore it is difficult to capture the look of the entire roof in one go.

The geometric pattern is not ordinary. The numerous circles display the 'dharmachakra' in which pairs of Gautama Gandharas are grouped together with pair of lions. This depicts the '*Dharmopdesa*' of the Tirthankara and the interpretation of the *divyadhvani* that emanated from the Tirthankara during the 'samavasarana of the Jina'. The squares have conventional lotus flowers at their centre. There are areas near the central wheel that depict beautiful lotus flowers in full bloom. On top of this hill containing the cave with Murals, there is another cave-like escarpment with Jain Beds, where ascetics lived

secluded lives. This place is called Ezhadipattam and it is on the eastern face of this hillock.

The Sittannavasal cave temple was developed to its present structure by the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. The outer pillared verandah was a later addition made by the cave from vandalism and to ensure that bats do not enter and harm the walls and roofs.<sup>17</sup>

The concluding part states that the Sittannavasal striking murals occupy a very important place in the evolution of Indian paintings. Even the few remaining paintings are very impressive and these are a reminder of the glorious era when vivid and colourful cave paintings were created throughout peninsular India by the Early Pandyas. The inscriptions on these beds are dated to the period between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The same mural tradition was continued by the Cholas. It is evident by some of the most intricate and vibrant murals are found within the walls of the circumambulatory passage around the *garbh graha* of the Brihadeeswara Temple, Tanjore.

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