
CITTANNAVASAL REFLECTS TRADITIONAL CULTURAL

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Abstract

Sittanavasal is a 2nd-century Jain complex of caves in Sittanavasal village in Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu, India. The monument is a rock-cut monastery or temple. Created by Jains, it is called the Arivar Koil and is a rock-cut cave temple of the Arihants. It contains remnants of notable frescoes from the 7th century. The murals have been painted with vegetable and mineral dyes in black, green, yellow, orange, blue, and white. Paintings have been created by applying colors over a thin wet surface of the lime plaster.

Introduction

The village was settled during the megalithic period from the 1st century BC according to excavations of several megalithic sites near the village. Jainism flourished here from 1st century BC to 10th century AD. The Arivarkovil or the Temple cave is initially dated to Pallava King Mahendravarman I (580-630AD) prior to his conversion from Jainism to Hinduism. The village later fell under the reign of the Pandavas in Tamil Nadu, and an inscription attributes renovation of the cave to a Pandyan king, probably Maran Sedan (654- 670AD) or Arikesari Maravarman (670-700AD). The Jain beds on the hill top indicate a Jaina era pilgrimage center which lasted until the 9th century CE.

Architecture of Sittanavasal

Sittanavasal is a rock-cut cave, situated on the western side of central part of a hill, which runs in a north-south direction. The hill measures approximately 70 meters (230 ft) in height and sits above the surrounding plain which has some archaeological monuments. The Jain natural caverns, called Ezhadippattam are approached from the foothills. The cave is approached by climbing a few 100 steps. The architectural features of the Sittanavasal Cave include the painting and sculptures found within its precincts. Archaeological Survey of India is responsible for the maintenance of the cave and the Jain beds.

Sittanavasal Cave temple

The paintings have been painted in fresco-secco technique with many mineral colors. The painting depicts beautiful lotus pond with lotus flowers, people collecting lotuses from the pond, two dancing figures, lilies, fish, geese, buffaloes and elephants. Mulk Raj Anand

said of the paintings, "Pallava craftsmen used greens and browns and pupils, with a genuine ability and a lyrical flow of theline. Lotuses spring up from imaginary ponds amid variegated greenery, under a bluish sheen." In addition, inscriptions of the 9th and 10th century are also seen. The ceiling of the Ardhamandapam is decorated with murals from the 7th century. The cave temple has simple pillars and sculptures of Jain Tirthankaras. However, most of the frescoes which were covered fully in plaster have been severely defaced or not clearly visible due to inadequate security and maintenance resulting in vandalism in the past five or six decades. Originally, the entire cave temple, including the sculptures, was covered with plaster and painted. The paintings are with the theme of Jain Samavasarana, the "most attractive heavenly pavilion" (it means the attainment of nirvana), and *Khatika bhumi*.

The layout of the west facing cave is the same as adopted in other rock-cut cave temples in the country during the 7th Century. As originally built, it had only a *garbha-griha* (sanctum sanctorum) and an ardhamandapam (semi hall). However, the *mukha-mandapa* (front hall) was an addition made in the frontage built during the Pandya Rule, which collapsed. Subsequently, a pillared veranda with a facade was added in front of the cave during the 20th century; the Maharaja of Pudukkottai added this part of the structure at the suggestion of Tottenham, the British administrator. It has two pillars and two pilasters and a square base entrance to a hexagonal portico, which were brought from the ruins of mantapas at Kudimiyamalai.

The Ardhamantapam, after the front entrance, is rectangular in plan of 20.5 metres (67 ft) long, 2.28 metres (7 ft 6 in) wide and 2.5 metres (8 ft 2 in) high, and the cubical cell of 2.89 metres (9 ft 6 in) width, (a little higher than the *garbha-griha*) with a facade which has two pillars and two pilasters at both ends. The pillars, as well as pilasters, are hexagonal in shape in the middle section while the top and bottom sections are square. Rock beam is sculpted above them as if supporting them; provided with large corbels (*potikai* in Tamil) with ornamentation or fluting, with an intervening plain band. The pillars which support this mandapam are typical of *Mahendra-order*. The entry into the *garbha-griha* is flanked by two niches, which also have smaller size pilasters, similar to the pillar design, with bold relief of lotus medallions carved on them. In the southern and northern sides of the ardhamantapam, niches are provided where the 23rd Tirthankara Parsvanatha and a Jain Acharya (teacher) are respectively carved in bas-relief. Parsvanatha is shown seated in "the dhyana (meditative) pose, cross-legged, with the hands placed one over the other, palms upwards, resting on the folded legs", a five-hooded serpent sheltering his head. An inscription on a pillar to the niche reads *[Ulo]kaditan* ("ruler of the world"), indicating Parsvanatha's divinity. The Acharya is in a similar posture as Parsvanatha but with an umbrella over his head. The inscription below this niche reads *Tiruvasiriyam* ("great teacher").

A door way of 5.5 feet (1.7 m) height and 2.5 feet (0.76 m) width from the ardhamantapa leads to the sanctum sanctorum (through a flight of steps), which has three bas-relief sculptures. The entrance has *sure-vyalis* (balustrades sculptured with the mythical

form of valid with twisted trunks). The sanctum sanctorum has a square plan of 2.89 feet (0.88 m) wide and height of 7.5 feet (2.3 m), and at the back wall there are three bas-reliefs, two are of Jain Tirthankaras (as evidenced by the triple umbrellas (chattris) over them) and the third relief is of an acharya (teacher). The ceiling of the garbha-griha which is painted shows a carved wheel with hub and axle that denotes the Dharma-chakra ("Wheel-of-the-Law"). Above the three images in Lotus position (seated posture), paintings are also seen which are surmised to represent a canopy which is carved with carpet designs with striped borders and squares and circles of different sizes with louts flower designs inscribed within the squares. The circles depict crosses with bulbous ends; the horizontal arm of the cross has depictions of human and lion figures. In the other areas, the ceiling has similar paintings as the lotus pond in the ardhamantapam. Plastered walls of the Sittanavasal Cave have varying thickness of 1–8 millimeters (0.039–0.315 in).

Paintings

The decorative paintings in the ceiling of the sanctum and Ardha-mandapam of Aravirkovil though compared to the classical cave painting styles used in the Ajanta Caves but have minor variations in use of the materials for creating the paintings and also reported to provide a link between the Ajanta paintings (4th–6th century AD) and the Chola paintings of 11th century at Thanjavur. The ceilings have a depiction of a lotus tank with natural-looking images of men, animals, flowers, birds, and fishes representing the Samavasarana faith of Jainism. The pillars are also carved with dancing girl and the king and the queen.

Paintings in the roof of the Ardhamnatapa are the mural paintings with Samavasarana theme. The mural exhibits a water tank or *Chitika-bhumi* which is shown with the tank made of tiles filled with lotus flowers and surrounded by *bhavas* ("the faithful"), elephants, fishes, one fish shown as jumping out of water, pillars with figurines of Pandya king Srimara Srivallabha (9th century AD) and his queen offering reverence to Ilam Gautama, an Acharya of Madura who created these paintings. While cleaning the paintings, one more layer of Samavasarana themed painting was revealed in the ceiling of the Garbha-griha, but in a carpet-design.

The study done by an artist on the depictions of the roof painting panel reveals: 3 birds, a man in loin cloth plucking flowers and the man is shown with a lily on right hand and lotuses on left hand, an elephant and fishes swimming, bird's eye on the top left thecorner.

Though severely damaged due to vandalism, remaining Frescoes have been preserved on the top parts of columns and ceilings inside the temple. Many of them are typical of the 9th-century Pandyan period and include detailed pictures of elephants, buffaloes, fish, geese, Jains gathering lotuses from a pond and dancing girls. These frescoes are considered to be some of the best frescoes of medieval India next to frescoes of Ajanta Caves and Bagh Caves. Not so well planned is the arrangement of panels of the Sittanavassal cave temple; the idea of an ensemble has not been adopted but arranged in a haphazard way.

Painting of the Sittanavasal Caves was analyzed to establish the technique and the material used to make the. Analysing a painting of a lotus pond in the ardhamantpam, it

has been inferred that they are made with Fresco-secco, techniques made over rough stone using rough plaster of 2.5 millimetres (0.098 in) thickness made of lime mortar and sand with minor impurities, applying 0.5 millimetres (0.020 in) thick lime wash of fine lime water when the rough lime plaster is still rough. The pigments used are composed of white made from lime, black made from wood charcoal or lamp black, yellow from yellow ochre, red from red ochre, blue from ultramarine\lapis lazuli, and green from terreverte. Pigments of permanent mineral colours (not vegetable colours as reported on the display plaque at the site by ASI) were applied over dry plaster surfaces without any adhesive grove; the process involved a chemical reaction of lime water which absorbed oxygen in the air and getting converted by a carbonisation process into insoluble calcium carbonate.

Conclusion

The pigments to adhere to the surface. At the initiative of Pudukkottai State, during 1937-39, the paintings were cleaned, and then given a preservative coating. Also, the damaged portions of the plastering were injected with cementing material and the paintings were also retouched.

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