

A Re-reading on Vibrant Mural Paintings of Sittanavasal Cave Temples

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Abstract

The Sittanavasal rock-cave is listed as one of the *adarsh smarak* monument by Archaeological Survey of India. An earliest inscription attributes its renovation to a Pandya King probably by Maran Sendan (654–670 AD). From this it is clear that the Early Pandya Kings too were scooped out and renovated monolithic rock cut cave temples and continued the art tradition of the Tamils. This paper traces the mural paintings at the Jain rock-cut cave temple at Sittanavasal are said to be an imperative as those of the Ajanta paintings.

Key Words: adarsh smarak, murals, arivar kovil, sittanavasal, arihants and sramana.

The Pudukkottai region has many archaeological finds of the megalithic burial sites from much earlier and numerous historical monuments existed in this region.¹ among these monuments, a rock-cut cave temple, situated on the western side of central part of a hill, which runs in a north–south direction of the village Sittanavasal.

This name Sittanavasal is a distorted form of *Sit-tan-na-va-yil*, a Tamil word, which means "the abode of great Saints." A unique Tamil *Sramana* complexes of caves executed in Sittanavasal village. The Sittanavasal rock-cave is listed as one of the *adarsh smarak* monument by Archaeological Survey of India.² (A.S.I) The A.S.I has listed Sittanavasal Cave in the list of "Must See" Indian Heritage.³

Sittanavasal cave temple also has another Cave Temple known as; Arivar Koil. This was also an important Jain centre for many centuries ago. It must be remembered that Jainism while spread to South India during the 4th-3rd centuries B.C., Chandragupta Maurya had converted to Jainism and had travelled to Shravanabelagola along with a large number of Jain ascetics. However the Sittanavasal rock-cut Jain caves were excavated in the 3rd century A.D. before the Pandya rule. The caves were first cut out into the natural cavern type structure of the Rock Cut Cave Temple face.

Earliest Jain inscriptions on these beds are dated to the period between the 3rd to 10th centuries A.D. It is evident that Jain ascetics were using this location for many centuries before the Arivar Kovil cave was excavated. The original inscriptions referred to the names of the ascetics, who performed the ritual of (progressive starving leading to death). The vandals have inscribed graffiti on these beds, *Sallekhana* and now the access has been barred with a steel barricade. Central and Southern Tamilaham have this King of many such Jain beds existed on top of various hills.

This Sittanavasal cave temple is assigned to 3rd-century A.D. The monument is a rock-cut monastery or temple, created by Tamil *Sramana* and is a rock cut cave temple of the *Arihants*. It contains remnants of notable frescoes from the 6th-7th century A.D. There are multiple inscriptions on the cave with these beds, among these the earliest one being a Tamil Brahmi inscription dated to the Sixth century A.D.

While the Sittanavasal village is dated from the Sangam age, this cave temple was corresponded to Mahendravarman I Pallava (580–630 AD) prior to his conversion from Jainism to Hinduism as a Saivite. However, an earliest Pandya inscription attributes its renovation to a Pandya King probably by Maran Sendan (654–670 AD).¹⁴The *Sramana* beds on the hill top is attributed to the Jain monk residence centre, which executed in the 3rd century A.D.

Perhaps the Pandya King Kadungon after regained his power over Madurai by overthrowing the Kalabhras. The early Pandya Kings too were temple builders and they scooped out Monolithic Rock Cut Cave Temples and continued the art in the subsequent period. In addition to the Rock Cut Cave Temples they continued of wall murals. The murals at Sittannavasal were made under the patronage of the early Pandya Kings and by the talented painters of the early Pandya kingdom.

Here it is interesting to understand the assessment of mural tradition in Tamil Country. 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 are in progress to paint on pottery. Their homes were adorned with wall art. Mural art, a form of wall art done on walls of homes, temple walls, and caves, has been predominant in Tamil Country from the beginning of the Christian era at the very tiniest. The art necessitates a layer of lime paste or lime mortar, over which organic and mineral based colours are used to fill in the drawings. The Sangam literature mentions the technique of mural art, colours used by the Tamils and the common motifs for paintings. Very few murals have persisted the whims and fancies of time and nature.

The murals, which have been painted with vegetable and mineral dyes in various colours namely black, green, yellow, orange, blue, and white.⁴ Paintings have been created by applying various colours over a thin wet surface of lime plaster.⁵ The themes painted in this temple are that of Lord Siva and Gods of *The Hindu* pantheon. The entire sandstone surface was covered with layers of thick lime plaster.⁶

Ancient structures or Architectural features such as *Gol Gumbaz*, *Talagirisvara* temple and this movement appealed to be relatively difficult.⁷ The Sittannavasal cave temple was enlarged to its present structure by the 9th A.D. The outer pillared verandah that we see today was a later addition made by the Tondaimans of Pudukkottai in the early 20th A.D. The pillars were brought from another temple and set within the excavated *verandah*. The ASI has made a gate with metal mesh. This has been done to protect the murals in the inner portions of the cave from vandalism and to ensure that bats do not enter and harm the walls and roofs.

The *ardhmandapam* pillars give a Pallava look. The *garbh-griha* and *ardhmandapam* 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 *ardhmandapam* wall mention the history of the temple. The temple walls, pillars, and roofs were decorated with murals during the reign of the Pandya King, Srimara Srivallabha, also known as Avnipasekhara (815-862 A.D). The murals were renovated and embellished and a *mukhamandapam* was added in front of the cave temple by a Jain *Acharya* named Ilan-Gautaman from Madurai.⁸ The lintel of the outer *verandah* is the remains of the original *mukhamandapam*.

The rectangular *ardhmandapam* has two broad simple pillars and two pilasters.⁹ 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. Such inscriptions have helped build the history of these remarkable creations.

The walls, pillars and roof of this *ardhmandapam* have the most exquisite surviving murals. Here it is interesting to know the paintings of Sittanavasal cave temple. The preservation of the painting was undertaken in the year 1942 by Dr. S. Paramasivan and K. R. Srinivasan, when they observed a patch of old painting of conventional carpet design superimposed by a new layer of painting. The superimposed layer of painting has been surmised as that done Ilan-Gautaman, whose name is also inscribed. The temple is maintained and administered by the Archaeological Survey of India as a meaning monument.

Here it is worthwhile to understand the paintings of Sittanavasal cave temple. The painting depict beautiful lotus pond with lotus flowers, people collecting lotuses from the pond, two dancing figures, lilies, fish, geese, buffaloes and elephants.¹⁰ Mulk Raj Anand says that the paintings of "the Pallavas made by the craftsmen used greens and browns and pupils, with a genuine ability and a lyrical flow of line. Lotuses spring up from imaginary ponds amid variegated greenery, under a bluish sheen."¹¹

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 is the most pronounced colour used for these figures. The beam area between the Pillars contains corbels. These have striking colours with blue, green mustard, pink, brown and black being the predominant shades. Attractive lotus and swan motifs besides the floral creepers and geometric designs strike the viewers.

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 this person must be of royalty. He is the Pandyan King Avanipasekhara Srivallaba, 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 in-between the royalty that is no more today.

The roof of the *ardhamandapa* contains vibrant paintings. The paintings at the corners have deep red as the background. There are green circles with flowers (mostly lotuses) spread through the area. The red colour stands out as very attractive and gives the effect of a heavenly carpet. 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 you gaze at the lotus pond, the more alive it becomes. The pond has a green hue. Fish swim in between the leaves and flowers.

The Lotus pond is not a depiction of just a beautiful pond and nature, but is associated with the Jain tradition 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 faith.¹² 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.

As per the Jain traditions, it is only a select few, who can attend the discourse. The *Bhavya* s (good souls) is those disciples, who have passed through several levels of *bhumis* or regions to occupy a seat to hear the discourse. The Second *Bhumi* is called the *Khatika Bhumi* (the lotus tank).¹³ The *Bhavya* s enters the lotus tank to clean their feet and collect lotus flowers, while the animals, birds and fishes also enjoy the pond. 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 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 tusked elephant and the buffaloes 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.

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 time.

In the Sanctum Sanctorum 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 lotus 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 *ardhamandapam*.¹⁴ Plastered walls of the Sittanavasal Cave have varying thickness of 1–8 millimetres (0.039–0.315 in). The pigmentation used for the paintings is over 1000 years old. Echo effect is clearly heard, if "om" is recited, only if inaudibly, in the small shrine.¹⁵

The decorative paintings in the ceiling of the sanctum and *ardhamandapa* 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 A.D.)¹⁶ and the Chola paintings of 11th century at Thanjavur.¹⁷ The ceilings have 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.¹⁸

Paintings in the roof of the *ardhamandapa* are the mural paintings with *Samavasarana* theme.¹⁹ The mural exhibits a water tank or *khatika-bhumi* which is shown with the tank made of tiles filled with lotus flowers and surrounded by *Bhavyas* ("the faithful"), elephants, fishes, one fish shown as jumping out of water, pillars with figurines of Pandya Srimara Srivallabha (9th century AD) and his queen offering reverence to Ilam Gautaman, 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 corner.²⁰ Though severely damaged due to vandalism, remaining frescoes paintings have been preserved on the top parts of columns and ceilings inside the temple. Many of them are typical of the 9th century the Pandya period and include detailed pictures of elephants, buffaloes, fish, geese, and Jain saints gathering lotuses from a pond and dancing girls.²¹

Painting of the Sittanavasal caves were analysed to establish the technique and the material used to make the. In Analysing a painting of a lotus pond in the *ardhamandapa*, 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 terre verte. 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, which enabled the pigments to adhere to the surface.²² At the initiative of Pudukkottai State, during 1937–39, the paintings were cleaned, and then given a preservative coating. The damaged portions of the plastering were injected with cementing material and the paintings were also retouched.

In the concluding part states that, the Sittannavasal murals sustained, ancient Mural tradition of the Tamils, to a very imperative place in the evolution of Indian paintings. Even the few remaining paintings are very striking and these are a prompt of the splendid era when vivid and colourful cave paintings were created throughout peninsular India. The mural tradition was sustained by the Cholas and some of the most intricate and vibrant murals are found within the walls of the circumambulatory passage around the *garbh-griha* of the Brihadeeswara Temple, Tanjore.

In the subsequent the frescos at the Kailasanathar Temple at Kanchipuram, is a repository of some of the finest wall frescos of the 8th century. The plaster has ground with age, but the areas, where the paintings are observable show mastery over the art. The Chalukyas of Badami (Vatapi) were also known for their temple wall frescos. During the early Pandya rule one can observed some of the most vibrant murals in Tamil Country. Most of us are aware of the vibrant murals of the world-famous Ajanta caves in the Aurangabad

district of Maharashtra. The Mural paintings at the Jain rock-cut cave at Sittannavasal (also called the Arivar Kovil) are said to be an imperative as those of the Ajanta paintings, yet they are hardly known. Sittannavasal cave paintings are situated on top of a rocky hill in the Pudukkottai District of Tamil Nadu. Archaeological Survey of India is responsible for the maintenance of the cave and the Jain beds.²³ The paintings have been painted in fresco-secco technique with many mineral colours. These frescoes are considered to be some of the best frescoes of medieval India next to frescoes of Ajanta Caves and Bagh Cave. Not so well intended is the arrangement of panels of the Sittanvassal cave temple; the idea of a collaborative has not been adopted but arranged in a haphazard way.

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