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Conception of Jain Materiality and the Composition of Jain Worlds

Muhammad Tanim Nowshad*

Abstract

Religious materialism cannot be estranged from its immateriality. Jain cosmology perceives its biotic and abiotic worlds and the related matters and components from its theological treatises and interpretations. In the Jain world where we live, it is conflowed with the related time cycle. All Jain worlds are not connected with this time cycle. Jainism uses a specific term 'Pudgala,' which is commonly used by all variants of the śramaṇic tradition. However, as a generic term it has some features that resemble other branches of śramaṇic School. But in Jainism this term implies some distinctive attributes of Jain materiality too. In this article Jain materiality and the composition of the Jain material world will be explained and elucidated using the necessary Jain texts, exegeses, interpretations, both old and new. Jain cosmology will be explained here too as Jain materiality is connected with this.

Śramaṇic tradition and its material world:

From the Jain texts it is tangible that Jain perception of the world is composed of traditional Hindu concepts and the rival śramaṇic traditions. The historical rivalry started some 6th century BCE based on some specific questions and arguments that eventually helped the protagonists of the movement confuting, refuting and rejecting some traditional beliefs and abolishing some canonical laws of Hinduism. As a result, the history of Indian philosophy was bifurcated and two parallel fluxes have been flowing till today. For better understanding of the śramaṇic worldview we have to dive into the depth of this tradition. The term *śramaṇa*

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refers to a person who labours, toils, or exerts himself for some higher or religious purpose. Lecture XXXII of *Uttaradhyāyana Sūtra* titled the ‘Causes of Carelessness’ recalls some of the sanctions we came across in *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*:

“A Sramana engaged in penance, should not allow himself to watch the shape, beauty, coquetry, laughter, prattle, gestures, and glances of women, nor retain a recollection of them in his mind.” (Müller 2002: Vol 45: 176)

The Jain *śramaṇas* want to ensure the efficacy of their dispassionate state of mind through the above Sutra, through which they want to prove their rational apprehension and worldview too. But Jains have their own logical framework and parameter to understand cosmos and this world. Like Hinduism and Buddhism, the universe is infinite in Jainism. Like Hinduism and Buddhism Jains believe that universe has been existing eternally; it has neither beginning nor end and time is cyclical. And therefore, one after another time cycle has been emerging. Hence, we can deduce that the concept of Jain time-space continuum has emerged from the Indic understanding.

It is to be noted that although in Hinduism the cyclic time-space continuum is eternal, it can be bookended by any unprecedented event. Jain time-space continua are running one after another without any cease or change like Buddhism (Dickstein 2024). The time cycle is called here *Kalpakāla*. Kalpa is here Jain unit of time. The *Kalpas* regulate the classical Jain cosmography (Dickstein 2024).

Jain Time cycle and Jain Time-Space Continua

In Jainism ‘Time’ and ‘Space’ are very important to determine the objective phenomenon. Bhattacharya has written that the spatial (*Kṣetra*), the temporal (*Kāla*), the essential (*Dravya*) and the modal (*Bhāva*) relationships between objects and objective phenomena constitute the Jain objective realities. They are not dependent on the knowing subjects; the knowing subjects can only know those objective realities, what the aforementioned factors constitute. They can also modify their nature. So, if experience and reason make someone to understand any object, one will understand that on the basis of its particular nature, location, mode, time and so forth (Bhattacharya 1953: 60-61). So, those who live in this time-spatial continuum, even if they understand their phenomenon objectively, this understanding may not lead them to understand the totality.

Jain cosmology perceives a wheel of time, which is divided into two halves: *Utsarpiṇī* or ascending part of the time cycle and *Avasarpiṇī*, the descending part of the time cycle. Each consists of 10 x 1 crore x 1 crore *Addhāsāgaropama* (10 *kotikotī Sāgaropama*). Thus, one cycle of time (*Kalpakāla*) gets over in 20 *kotikotī Sāgaropama* (Samantabhadra 2016: 71). The current one is an *Avasarpiṇī*. In each half of the cosmic time cycle exactly twenty-four *Tīrthaṅkaras* grace this part of the universe. The first *Tīrthaṅkara* in this present time cycle (Hunda *Avasarpiṇī*) was Ṛṣabhadeva, who is credited for formulating and organizing human beings to live in a society harmoniously. The 24th and the last *Tīrthaṅkara* of the present half-cycle was Mahāvīra (599 BC–527 BC). It is even recorded in the modern history that Mahāvīra and his predecessor, Pārśvanātha, the twenty-third *Tīrthaṅkara* existed in the world (nowshad Oct-Dec 2023: Vol 61: Issue 23: 26-27).

The Jain Time Cycles are morally conditioned. Lawrence A. Babb vividly described that,

“As just mentioned, change is not a feature of the Jain cosmos as a whole; rather, cyclical movements occur only in certain small areas of the cosmos of which the part of the world we inhabit is one example. The cycle consists of periods of improvement and decline in an endless succession. An *utsarpiṇī* (ascending epoch) begins in a condition of moral and physical squalor. As things gradually improve, the moral and physical condition of human beings strengthens and nature becomes kinder and more bountiful; at the cycle’s high point the world is a paradise. Then begins an *avasarpiṇī* (an epoch of gradual decline) in which all of the attainments of the previous epoch are gradually undone until the cycle bottoms out and a new ascending epoch begins. We are currently in a declining epoch. A complete cycle is known as a *kalpa*.”(Lawrence 2015: 106-7)

Each half-cycle of time has been subdivided to indicate six distinct phases of wellbeing. This wellbeing indicated the welfare of all beings; naturally it includes human beings or *Anthropos*. This can be understood by an Aristotelian term ‘*eudaimonia*’. But Jain wellbeing includes all beings and entities at a time. It can draw a fare debate how two opponents could be benefitted if we want to understand from the idea of *Pareto Optimality*. The concept explicitly expresses that if all possible Pareto improvements have been accomplished in a society and no option remains left that can make anyone benefitted through any means, it is not possible to make anyone further better-off without making someone worse-off. However, we can guess that a particular theology explains a being or a group as ‘good’ or ‘evil’ from its understanding. So,

it is putative here that ‘the good tidings’ would be ensured for those who are good, just and righteous from the Jain vantage point.

Utsarpiṇī’s first phase is very miserable and gloomy, which is called *duṣamā-duṣamā*. Then with the lapse of time the tide of absolute misery lessens and the phase *duṣamā* begins. Here misery is comparative low. Then a new phase called *duṣamā-suṣamā* follows it, when misery starts to end and happiness starts to prevail but welfare does not triumph wholeheartedly. Then a new sun of hope rises on the horizon. Hence, more happiness and welfare prevail over evil and unhappiness, but they cannot diminish the darkness sides entirely. This phase is called *suṣamā-duṣamā*. A positive phase with bounties of welfare and happiness follows it. This phase is called *suṣamā*. Finally, the long awaited absolute positive phase of welfare and all good tidings emerge. All evils get vanquished by all means. This phase is called *suṣamā-suṣamā* (Dickstein 2024).

Thereafter, the reverse order starts, which is called the *Avasarpiṇī*. The six phases move with a reverse current. Twenty-four *Tīrthaṅkaras* or the “ford makers” and supreme spiritual teachers according to Jainism appear during both *Utsarpiṇī* and *Avasarpiṇī* halves. Dickstein has deduced the fact that the *Tīrthaṅkaras* never appear in the “very happy” or “very unhappy” phases of the *kalpa*, as well as in some other phases. These phases are too uncongenial to ensure the flux of dharma because inverse relationship between extreme happiness and the urge of *mokṣa*, and extreme unhappiness and the ability to pursue *mokṣa* (Dickstein 2024). Lawrence A. Babb wrote,

“Precisely twenty-four *Tīrthaṅkaras* appear in each *utsarpiṇī* and *avasarpiṇī* epoch. *Tīrthaṅkaras* are born only in the second, third and fourth eras of a *utsarpiṇī* epoch and the third and fourth of an *avasarpiṇī* epoch. They do not appear during the extremes of happiness or unhappiness because too much happiness discourages the sense of urgency about liberation required to motivate ascetic practices, and too much unhappiness means that humans are too miserable to pursue liberation by engaging in such practices. Our current era in our *avasarpiṇī* is the fifth, and therefore no *Tīrthaṅkaras* will appear and nobody will achieve liberation (in our corner of the terrestrial world) until the next *utsarpiṇī* is well under way.” (Lawrence 2015: 107)

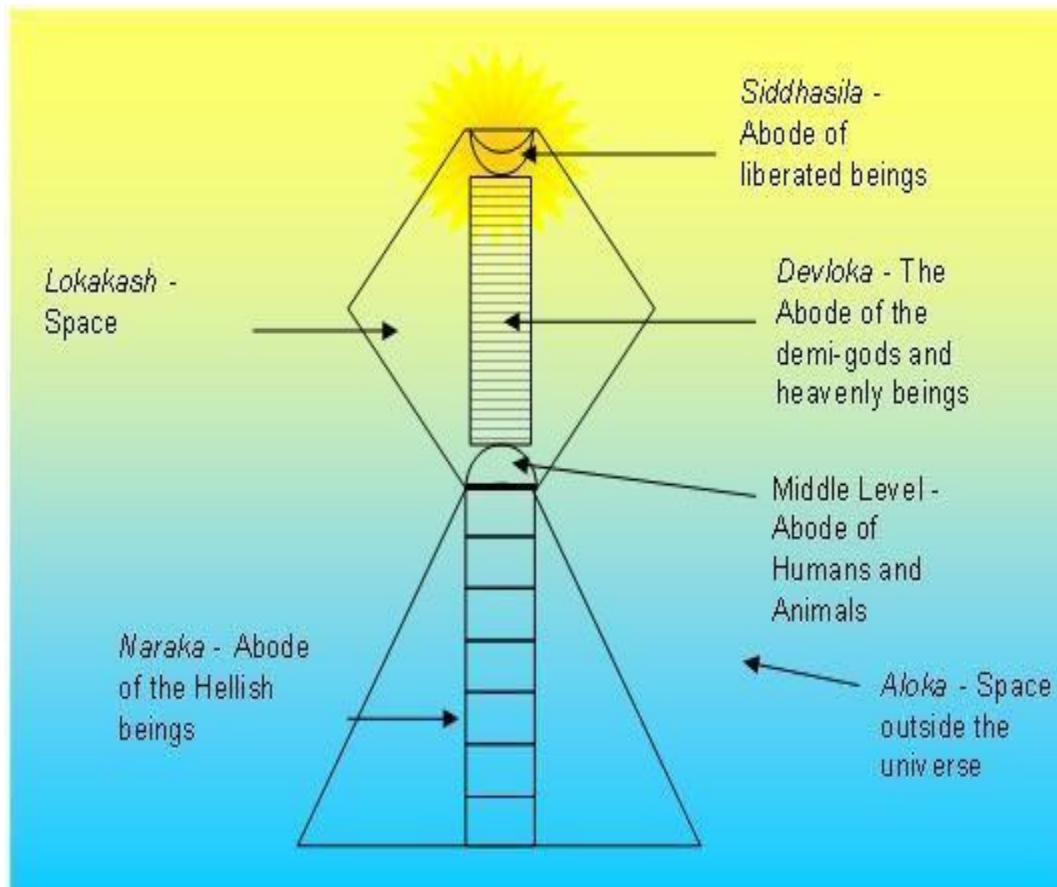
According to Jain cosmology human beings and other biotic and abiotic entities that we see live in the middle-world, which is called *Madhyaloka* in Jain parlance. It is a familiar Indic term as well. Our living space or ‘lebensraum’ is surrounded by an ocean. The centre of this earthy living place is called *Jambudvīpa*, literally means ‘Rose Apple Island’. It has seven zones or *kṣetras*. Only two of them are subject to ebb and flow of this cosmic time. These two zones are *Bharataḥkṣetra* and *Airāvataḥkṣetra*. The time cycles are attuned with ebb and low tides. The *Kalpas* do not function in the upper world or *ūrdhvaloka* or lower world or *adholoka* (Dickstein 2024).

Jainism believes in rebirth and reincarnation. Lawrence A. Babb has described the structure of the Jain cosmos.

“It is a vertical structure, taller than it is wide, widest at the bottom, and vast in extent. Outside of it is merely non-cosmos. Its overall shape is not unlike the outline of a human figure standing with arms akimbo and legs spread, which indeed is how it is sometimes represented in artistic portrayals. This entire cosmos swarms with an ‘infinite’ (*ananta*, as opposed to *asaṃkhyata*, ‘uncountable’) number of living things, which occupy its every cranny. Running from the very top to the bottom is a shaft known as the *trasa nāḍī*, so named because *trasa* (mobile beings with two or more senses) can live only within its boundaries. The simplest forms of life – the single-sensed *nigodas* and element beings – are found both within and outside the *trasa nāḍī* and occupy the cosmos to its very outer boundaries. At the very top of the cosmos is *siddha loka* or *siddha śilā* (a small zone shaped as an upward-facing crescent) where liberated souls abide eternally in omniscient bliss.” (Lawrence 2015: 110-11)

Jain writings and traditions have emphasized on the structural precision of the cosmos. The height of the entire cosmos is given in a unit of distance, which is called the *rajju* (rope). It is said the height of the cosmos is fourteen *rajjus*. One account informs us that a *rajju* is equal to the distance covered by a god flying for six months at the rate of 2,057,152 *yojanas* per second (Caillat; Kumar 1981: 20).

The cosmos has three subdivisions. In-between the upper world and the lower a thin disc known as *madhya-loka* (middle world), and it is the abode of the human beings. Below the disc there is a hellish region called *adho-loka* (lower world). Above the disc a heavenly region is existing, called *ūrdhva-loka* (upper world). The depth of the lower *adho-loka* is seven *rajjus* and there it has seven layers of hell (Lawrence 2015: 111-12).



Pic: The Jain Cosmos

Jain biotic and abiotic entities

Jain microcosms and macrocosms are constituted of *Pudgala*, something which is supposed to be alike atom but can form non-substantial matters and entities. In Jain ontology *Pudgala* has been constituted of two words; *Pud* and *Gala*. The words mean fusion and fission respectively. *Pud* involves the association or fusion of material and immaterial substances, which are called *Dravya* in Sanskrit language. *Gala* means dissociation or disintegration of matters or substances from one another. In Jainims *Pudgala* refers to *Rūpi-ajīvas* or the non-sentient or non-living substances. The fusions and fissions occur both among the *Jīvās* or the sentient beings or substances and the *Pudgalas*. *Pudgalas* fall in the ambit of the *Ājīvas* (Sharma 1997: 63). The human deeds have shapes through these associations and dissociations (Saran Jain). This is the process that the Karmic world has been formed

according to Jainism. The absolute *Pudgala* (absolute non-sentient substance) does not belong to the Karmic world. It does not experience any rebirth and reincarnation.

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Cultural Transformation and Socio-Economic Dynamics of the Jain *Sarāk* Community in Barkona Village, Bankura: A Field-Based Ethnographic Study

Uttam Gope* & Dr Anupam Jash#

Abstract

The Jain *Sarāk* community, an ancient socio-religious group in eastern India, has undergone significant cultural and economic transformations over centuries. This study examines the socio-economic conditions, religious transition, and cultural practices of the *Sarāk* population in Barkona village, Bankura district, West Bengal. Using ethnographic fieldwork, household surveys, and structured interviews, the research assesses changes in religious adherence, economic diversification, and community structures. The study reveals a gradual assimilation of Jain customs into Hindu practices, with many *Sarāk* families identifying as Hindu despite their Jain ancestry. Ritualistic practices such as Das Lakshman Parva and Mahavir Jayanti remain prominent, but traditional Jain dietary restrictions and marriage customs have largely disappeared.

Economically, the *Sarāk* community exhibits a diversified occupational structure, including farming, skilled labour, and government employment. Household income varies significantly, with farming-based families earning between ₹3,000–₹8,000, while salaried workers earn up to ₹45,000 per month. Education levels are relatively high, with 85% literacy, though gender disparities persist in access to higher education. Healthcare remains a major concern, with 30% of elderly residents suffering from chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes, exacerbated by limited healthcare access. Sanitation infrastructure is inadequate, with 20% of residents still practicing open defecation despite government efforts.

Despite increasing Hindu influence, Jain revivalist efforts persist through pilgrimages, temple construction, and Jain welfare groups. The study underscores the urgent need for cultural preservation initiatives, economic development programs, improved healthcare services, and gender-inclusive education policies. These findings contribute to broader discussions on religious assimilation, caste dynamics, and socio-economic evolution in rural India, offering insights for sociologists, historians, and policymakers.

Keywords: Jain *Sarāk* community, Religious assimilation, Socio-economic transformation, Cultural identity, Rural Bengal, Ethnographic study

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Introduction

The Jain *Sarāk* community represents a unique socio-religious group that has historically been associated with Jainism but has undergone significant cultural shifts over time. While the origins of the *Sarāk* caste trace back to early Jainism, particularly the *Śrāvaka* tradition, contemporary *Sarāk* populations in West Bengal and Jharkhand exhibit a complex blend of Jain and Hindu customs. The historical evolution and socio-religious transformations of this community warrant a critical academic examination, particularly in the context of religious assimilation, caste identity, and socio-economic adaptation (Dundas, 2002; Cort, 2010).

1.1 Historical Context of the *Sarāk* Community

The term *Sarāk* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Śrāvaka*, meaning a lay Jain devotee. Jainism, which flourished in eastern India during the early medieval period, had a profound influence on regional socio-cultural structures (Shah, 1998). The *Sarāk* community is believed to be among the earliest Jain settlers in present-day West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and Jharkhand. However, centuries of socio-political changes, including the decline of Jain monastic institutions and the rise of Hindu kingdoms, led to gradual assimilation into local Hindu traditions (Flügel, 2006). Despite their Jain origins, many *Sarāk* families today identify as both Jain and Hindu, reflecting a fluid and hybrid religious identity (Jaini, 1979).

1.2 Socio-Economic Dynamics in Rural Bengal

The socio-economic conditions of Jain *Sarāks* have been largely shaped by agrarian livelihoods, caste hierarchies, and regional economic shifts. Traditionally engaged in agriculture, trade, and craftsmanship, *Sarāks* have seen a decline in their distinct Jain practices due to socio-political disruptions and economic constraints (Singh, 2014). Recent ethnographic studies indicate that many *Sarāk* families have diversified their occupations, moving into government services, business, and skilled labour. However, disparities in income, education, and healthcare access persist, particularly in rural areas (Desai & Dubey, 2011).

1.3 Rationale for the Study

The Barkona village in Bankura district represents a microcosm of these broader socio-religious changes. The village has 147 *Sarāk* families and approximately 800 individuals, making it one of the key Jain *Sarāk* settlements in West Bengal. Recent field observations suggest that while older generations maintain vestiges of Jain customs, younger generations are increasingly identifying with Hinduism. The presence of Jain temples, pilgrimage visits, and the celebration of Mahavir Jayanti indicate continued religious engagement, albeit with significant syncretic adaptations (Cort, 2002). This study, therefore, aims to document the current socio-economic status, cultural practices, and religious transformations of the *Sarāk* community in Barkona village, providing empirical insights into the shifting dynamics of religious identity in rural Bengal.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following key objectives:

1. To examine the socio-economic conditions of the *Sarāk* community in Barkona, including household income, occupational patterns, and access to education and healthcare.
2. To assess the cultural and religious transformations, particularly the extent of Jain adherence versus Hindu assimilation.
3. To analyse the role of religious institutions and Jain organizations in preserving *Sarāk* identity.
4. To explore policy recommendations for cultural preservation, economic development, and community welfare.

1.5 Structure of the Paper

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the research methodology, including data collection techniques and analytical frameworks. Section 3 presents the key findings on demographics, economic conditions, religious practices, and education levels. Section 4 discusses the broader implications of religious assimilation and socio-economic transformation. Finally, Section 5 concludes with recommendations for policy interventions, cultural preservation, and community development.

This study contributes to academic discourse on caste-religion intersections, socio-economic mobility, and religious transformations in rural India, offering valuable insights for sociologists, anthropologists, and policymakers.

2. Methodology:

This study employs a multi-method research design, integrating qualitative ethnographic fieldwork with quantitative survey analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Jain *Sarāk* community in Barkona village. The research methodology ensures reliability, validity, and academic rigor in data collection and analysis.

2.1 Research Design and Approach

The study follows a descriptive and exploratory research design to document the socio-economic and cultural transformations within the Jain *Sarāk* community. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining ethnographic fieldwork, structured household surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) to capture the lived experiences of the *Sarāk* people.

The qualitative component included participant observation, where researchers engaged with the community to document religious practices, social interactions, and economic activities. The quantitative component involved a structured questionnaire covering demographic details, income levels, education, health, and religious affiliation.

2.2 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure representation across different age groups, occupations, and socio-religious affiliations. The study surveyed 147 *Sarāk* households, accounting for approximately 800 individuals residing in Barkona village.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Household composition (nuclear vs. joint families)
- Religious affiliation (Jain vs. Hindu influences)
- Socio-economic status (income levels, occupations)
- Education levels (literate vs. non-literate individuals)
- Age and gender distribution (to capture intergenerational differences)

2.3 Data Collection Methods

2.3.1 Household Surveys

A structured survey questionnaire was administered to 147 *Sarāk* families, collecting data on demographics, household income, expenditure patterns, educational attainment, and occupational trends. The questionnaire was developed following preliminary field visits to ensure cultural relevance and linguistic accessibility.

2.3.2 Ethnographic Observations

Ethnographic observations were conducted over a three-month period, allowing researchers to document daily rituals, religious practices, and economic activities. Observational data were recorded through field notes, photographic documentation, and informal conversations.

2.3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with community elders, religious leaders, women, youth, and local schoolteachers. These interviews provided historical perspectives, insights into religious assimilation, and perceptions of socio-economic change.

2.3.4 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Three focus group discussions (each consisting of 10-12 participants) were organized to facilitate in-depth discussions on:

- The preservation of Jain traditions and cultural heritage
- Economic challenges and occupational transitions
- Gender roles and educational aspirations
- Religious transformation and Hindu integration

2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

2.4.1 Qualitative Analysis

Ethnographic field notes, interviews, and FGDs were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo software was used to code data and identify recurring patterns in religious adaptation, social identity, and economic diversification.

2.4.2 Quantitative Analysis

Survey data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Microsoft Excel and SPSS were employed for frequency distribution, cross-tabulation, and correlation

analysis. The socio-economic disparities and religious adherence trends were examined through chi-square tests and regression models.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research guidelines, ensuring informed consent from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and interviews were conducted in Bengali, the native language, to facilitate genuine responses. The research was approved by an institutional ethics committee, aligning with Elsevier's publication standards.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 Demographic and Caste Identity

- The Barkona *Sarāk* community consists predominantly of Maji surnames.
- While 76 families identify with the Adi Dev lineage, 71 families belong to the Rishi Dev lineage.
- A notable division exists between *Swetambara* and *Digambara* sub-sects, though adherence to Jainism has significantly declined.

3.2 Religious Transformation and Cultural Shifts

- Jain religious practices are largely replaced by Hindu customs.
- Many *Sarāk* families worship Jain idols within Hindu temples, unknowingly practicing syncretic faiths.
- A majority consider Vivek Goswami, a Hindu priest, as their guru, indicating a shift in religious allegiance.
- Das Lakshman Parva and Mahavir Jayanti remain widely celebrated, maintaining some Jain traditions.

3.3 Socio-Economic Conditions

- Primary occupations: Farming, daily wage labour, government jobs, and carpentry.
- Household structure: 40 families reside in mud houses, 65 in semi-concrete houses, and 37 in fully constructed houses.
- Monthly Income:
 - Farming-based families earn between ₹3,000–₹8,000 per month.
 - Government-employed individuals earn up to ₹45,000 monthly.
 - Business and skilled labour contribute to economic variability.
- Health and sanitation:
 - 30% of elderly individuals suffer from chronic illnesses (hypertension, diabetes, arthritis).

- 20% of residents defecate in the open, despite government-installed toilets.
- Water sources include tube wells and borewells, with 50% of households having direct access.

The results indicate a complex interplay between tradition and modernization, as economic pressures, education, and religious shifts influence the social structure of the Jain *Sarāk* community. The ongoing transition toward Hindu practices, the rise in economic diversification, and the gendered disparities in education and employment provide key insights into the transformation of this historically significant community.

3.4 Education and Literacy Trends

The education and literacy levels in Barkona village highlight a complex interplay between historical socio-cultural structures and modern aspirations. The study found that 85% of the population is literate, with a higher literacy rate among men (90%) compared to women (78%). While literacy rates indicate positive educational advancements, gender-based disparities persist, particularly in access to higher education and professional training.

3.4.1 Access to Education

- Primary education: Almost all children (98%) are enrolled in local primary schools, reflecting successful penetration of foundational education.
- Secondary education: A decline in retention is observed at the secondary level, with only 65% of students continuing past grade 10.
- Higher education: Only 30% of students pursue higher education, with boys being twice as likely to attend college compared to girls.
- Professional training: Limited participation in vocational training programs, though some students have pursued technical courses such as polytechnic, ITI, and nursing.

3.4.2 Socio-Cultural Barriers to Education

- Gender roles: Early marriage among women and domestic responsibilities act as constraints, limiting the participation of girls in higher education.
- Economic factors: Financial constraints discourage families from investing in higher education, particularly for female students.
- Religious transition: Jain *Sarāk* families, historically emphasizing knowledge and literacy, now exhibit a gradual decline in formal education, possibly influenced by socio-religious shifts toward Hindu traditions that prioritize alternative skill sets.

3.4.3 Educational Attainment and Employment Prospects

- Government jobs: A few highly educated *Sarāks* hold teaching, administrative, and railways positions.
- Self-employment: Many educated individuals opt for business, carpentry, and trade instead of seeking formal employment.

- Brain drain: The study highlights youth migration to urban centres for better education and job prospects, leading to a rural-urban educational divide.

The findings emphasize the need for targeted educational policies, including scholarships for *Sarāk* students, vocational training programs, and gender-focused education incentives. Ensuring continued educational growth while addressing socio-economic barriers will be key to sustainable development in Barkona village.

3.5 Religious Pilgrimage and Jain Heritage Religious pilgrimage plays a critical role in the preservation and continuity of Jain heritage within the *Sarāk* community. Although many members of the Barkona village have assimilated into Hindu customs, their engagement with Jain pilgrimage sites indicates a latent cultural connection to Jainism.

3.5.1 Popular Jain Pilgrimage Destinations

Survey data reveal that 80% of *Sarāk* families have visited at least one Jain pilgrimage site, with Madhuban (Jharkhand) being the most frequently visited. Other significant sites include:

- Shikharji (Jharkhand): A key pilgrimage site for both *Digambara* and *Swetambara* Jains.
- Rajgir (Bihar): Associated with Lord Mahavira's teachings.
- Pawapuri (Bihar): The site of Lord Mahavira's nirvana.
- Gomateshwara (Karnataka): A historically significant Jain centre.

3.5.2 Role of Pilgrimage in Cultural Identity

- Religious reinforcement: Families that visit these sites report a stronger attachment to Jain philosophy.
- Intergenerational transmission: Younger members gain exposure to Jain traditions through pilgrimage experiences.
- Jain organizational support: Institutions such as *Raj Parivar* and *Samekit Group* facilitate pilgrimage participation by covering travel and accommodation costs for *Sarāk* pilgrims.

3.5.3 Challenges to Jain Pilgrimage Participation

Despite a high rate of pilgrimage engagement, several obstacles exist:

- Economic constraints: Low-income families struggle to afford frequent travel.
- Religious duality: Some *Sarāk* families hesitate to visit Jain sites due to their partial Hindu integration.
- Geographic accessibility: Many key Jain pilgrimage centres are located outside Bengal, requiring long-distance travel.

The continued engagement of *Sarāk* families in Jain pilgrimage practices reflects a resilience of their cultural heritage, even as they navigate religious transformation. Strengthening access to pilgrimage through subsidies, educational initiatives, and community-driven awareness programs can further reinforce Jain identity among the *Sarāk* community.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex and evolving socio-religious landscape of the Jain *Sarāk* community in Barkona village. The interplay between religious identity, economic adaptation, and social integration forms the core of this discussion. The declining adherence to Jain customs, increasing Hindu assimilation, and economic diversification present a case of dynamic cultural transformation that requires further sociological examination.

4.1 Religious Transformation and Identity Shift

The study reveals a significant erosion of Jain identity among the *Sarāk* community in Barkona. While older generations retain some Jain customs, such as participation in Das Lakshman Parva and Mahavir Jayanti, younger generations increasingly align with Hindu rituals and deities. This shift is largely influenced by inter-community interactions, accessibility to Hindu temples, and changing educational perspectives. The role of Vivek Goswami, a Hindu priest revered by the *Sarāk* families, underscores the weakening Jain institutional presence in the village.

Despite this assimilation, the continuation of Jain pilgrimage practices reflects an undercurrent of religious heritage. The community's visits to Shikharji, Rajgir, Pawapuri, and Madhuban demonstrate a lingering connection to Jainism, even as its doctrinal significance diminishes in daily life. These findings align with broader anthropological theories of syncretism, where religious groups adopt dominant cultural practices while maintaining selective ancestral traditions (Flügel, 2006; Dundas, 2002).

4.2 Socio-Economic Diversification and Occupational Shifts

The study reveals a diversification of economic activities among the *Sarāk* population, a trend that significantly influences their cultural and religious inclinations. Traditionally an agrarian community, the *Sarāks* have gradually embraced government jobs, skilled trades, and small businesses, reflecting broader national trends of rural economic mobility (Desai & Dubey, 2011).

The disparity in income levels among *Sarāk* families highlights economic stratification within the community. Households engaged in agriculture and daily wage labour report incomes between ₹3,000–₹8,000 per month, whereas families with government employment or business ventures earn upwards of ₹45,000 monthly. This economic gap has led to differential access to education, healthcare, and social mobility, further accelerating cultural assimilation into mainstream Hindu society, which often provides greater economic networking opportunities.

4.3 Education as a Catalyst for Change

Education emerges as a critical determinant of socio-religious transformation within the *Sarāk* community. While the literacy rate in Barkona village stands at 85%, gender-based disparities

persist, particularly in higher education and vocational training. The low participation of women in higher education is a notable concern, often attributed to early marriage customs and domestic responsibilities.

Furthermore, the study finds that younger, educated *Sarāk* members are more likely to identify with Hindu customs, reflecting a generational divergence in religious and cultural beliefs. Education fosters social mobility and integration into broader networks, further diluting distinct Jain practices in favor of dominant Hindu traditions (Singh, 2014). The migration of educated youth to urban centres also creates a rural-urban divide, where returning migrants bring back mainstream cultural influences, reshaping village traditions.

4.4 The Role of Pilgrimage in Cultural Continuity

Despite evident Hindu assimilation, Jain pilgrimage remains a key factor in cultural retention within the *Sarāk* community. 80% of surveyed families have undertaken at least one pilgrimage to a Jain religious site, indicating a latent yet significant connection to Jain heritage. These visits reinforce ritualistic memory, even if doctrinal adherence has waned.

However, several challenges hinder sustained pilgrimage participation, including economic constraints, geographic inaccessibility, and religious ambivalence. The findings suggest that institutional support from Jain organizations—such as financial subsidies for travel and educational outreach about Jain history—could strengthen religious engagement among younger *Sarāk* generations.

4.5 Implications for Cultural Preservation

The findings underscore the urgency of cultural preservation initiatives to sustain Jain identity within the *Sarāk* community. Several recommendations emerge from this analysis:

- **Institutional Strengthening:** Jain organizations must enhance their presence in rural Bengal by establishing local Jain centres, educational initiatives, and religious outreach programs.
- **Economic Support:** Facilitating entrepreneurial and vocational training within the *Sarāk* community can reduce the economic compulsion driving religious assimilation.
- **Gender-Inclusive Educational Policies:** Scholarships and educational incentives should be provided to increase female participation in higher education, reducing socio-economic disparities.
- **Pilgrimage Accessibility Programs:** Jain institutions should offer subsidized pilgrimage travel to reinforce cultural identity and religious retention.

4.6 Broader Sociological Implications

The case of the *Sarāk* community aligns with broader anthropological discussions on cultural hybridization and identity adaptation in rural South Asia. The study contributes to scholarship on caste-religion dynamics, rural economic transformation, and generational shifts in faith practices (Cort, 2010; Jaini, 1979).

The Jain *Sarāks* of Barkona exemplify how historically marginalized communities navigate religious duality, balancing ancestral traditions with socio-economic pragmatism. Future

research should explore comparative studies with other *Sarāk* settlements across Bengal and Jharkhand, as well as longitudinal studies tracking cultural retention over time.

This discussion highlights the interwoven nature of religious, economic, and educational transformations within the *Sarāk* community of Barkona. While Jain traditions persist in symbolic forms, the overarching trend points towards gradual Hinduization, economic mobility, and cultural adaptation. Addressing these shifts through policy interventions, religious institutional support, and socio-economic programs will be crucial in shaping the future identity of the Jain *Sarāk* community.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the socio-economic transformations, religious shifts, and cultural adaptations of the Jain *Sarāk* community in Barkona village, Bankura district. The research findings highlight a gradual yet significant erosion of Jain religious practices, increased integration with Hindu customs, and a diversification of economic and educational trajectories. While Jain traditions persist in symbolic forms, the dominant trend reflects a gradual Hinduization and socio-economic pragmatism.

The religious transformation of the *Sarāk* community is primarily driven by intergenerational shifts in belief systems, increased interaction with Hindu religious institutions, and limited access to formal Jain educational and religious infrastructure. Despite this, Jain pilgrimage practices remain an important cultural anchor, suggesting that Jain identity continues to exist in a hybridized form. The economic diversification within the community, particularly the movement towards government jobs, small-scale business enterprises, and skilled labour, has played a key role in shaping new social identities and class structures within the *Sarāk* population.

A critical finding of the study is the impact of education on religious and social mobility. The younger generation, particularly those pursuing higher education and urban employment, is less likely to adhere to traditional Jain customs, further accelerating cultural assimilation. However, gender disparities in education, coupled with economic stratification, continue to create social imbalances within the community. The role of religious institutions and Jain welfare groups remains crucial in preserving cultural identity, but their impact is currently limited by economic constraints and a lack of localized Jain community centers.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy and community-based recommendations are proposed to ensure the preservation of Jain *Sarāk* identity while fostering socio-economic growth:

5.2.1 Strengthening Cultural and Religious Identity

- Establishment of Jain Cultural Centres: Creating localized Jain heritage centres in Bankura to provide religious education, community gatherings, and cultural awareness programs.
- Revitalization of Jain Temples and Monuments: Efforts should be made to restore and promote historical Jain sites in Bengal, reinforcing heritage consciousness.

- Religious Literacy Initiatives: Introduction of Jain philosophy and cultural studies in local schools to educate young *Sarāk* individuals about their historical and spiritual lineage.

5.2.2 Economic Empowerment and Livelihood Enhancement

- Skill Development Programs: Vocational training tailored to entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture, and technological skills can create economic independence and reduce reliance on daily wage labour.
- Microfinance and Business Support: Facilitating microfinance initiatives and business cooperatives to encourage self-employment among *Sarāk* families, particularly for women.
- Government Collaboration for Employment Growth: Advocacy for reservation benefits and economic schemes that support *Sarāk* communities in securing government and corporate employment.

5.2.3 Enhancing Educational Opportunities

- Scholarships for Higher Education: Implementation of scholarship programs for *Sarāk* students, particularly for women and economically disadvantaged youth, to encourage higher education participation.
- Vocational and Technical Education: Promotion of technical education institutes that cater to market-driven skills, ensuring long-term employment security.
- Bridging the Rural-Urban Education Divide: Encouraging urban-educated *Sarāk* youth to engage in community development programs through mentorship and educational outreach.

5.2.4 Promoting Jain Pilgrimage Accessibility

- Subsidized Travel Programs: Jain welfare groups and religious institutions should collaborate to provide subsidized pilgrimage tours for *Sarāk* families.
- Digital Awareness and Outreach: Creating online platforms and educational content about Jain pilgrimage sites, rituals, and heritage, making religious knowledge more accessible.
- Community-Led Pilgrimage Groups: Encouraging *Sarāk* families to organize group pilgrimages, fostering a sense of collective religious identity.

5.2.5 Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

- Women's Leadership and Participation: Encouraging women's participation in community decision-making, particularly in religious and economic sectors.
- Reducing Gender Disparities in Education and Employment: Implementing awareness campaigns to challenge traditional norms that limit women's access to higher education and skilled employment.
- Health and Sanitation Initiatives: Strengthening healthcare accessibility, particularly for women and the elderly, through government and NGO partnerships.

5.3 Future Research Directions

This study highlights several areas that require further academic exploration:

1. **Comparative Analysis Across Regions:** Future research should investigate Jain *Sarāk* communities across Bengal, Jharkhand, and Bihar to assess regional variations in religious transformation and socio-economic mobility.
2. **Longitudinal Studies on Cultural Retention:** A long-term ethnographic study tracking the next generation of *Sarāk* youth could provide insights into whether Jain identity is further diluted or revived.
3. **Impact of Globalization on Rural Religious Communities:** Investigating how digital technology, migration patterns, and global economic trends shape the future religious practices of marginalized Jain communities.
4. **Interfaith and Caste Dynamics in Rural Bengal:** Examining how caste hierarchies and interfaith interactions affect the religious transformation of *Sarāk* communities.

5.4 Final Thoughts

This study provides an in-depth understanding of the cultural, economic, and religious shifts within the Jain *Sarāk* community of Barkona village. While the findings reveal an undeniable trend of Hinduization, they also emphasize the resilience of Jain cultural symbols and pilgrimage practices. The intersection of economic mobility, education, and religious adaptation presents both challenges and opportunities for cultural preservation. By implementing community-led initiatives, strengthening economic opportunities, and promoting Jain cultural awareness, it is possible to preserve the unique identity of the Jain *Sarāk* community while facilitating their socio-economic progress. This research serves as a valuable foundation for policymakers, scholars, and Jain institutions seeking to address the intersection of religious transformation and rural development.

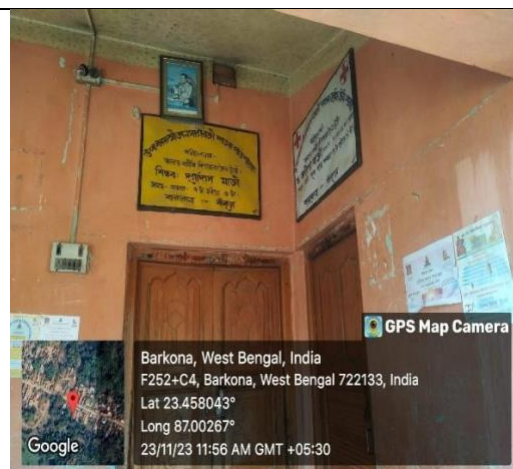
[Acknowledgement: The authors express sincere gratitude to the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) for granting the Major Research Project Grant (F. No. 02/194/2022-23/ICSSR/RP/MJ/ GEN) for this study.]

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Barkona Digambar Jain Temple



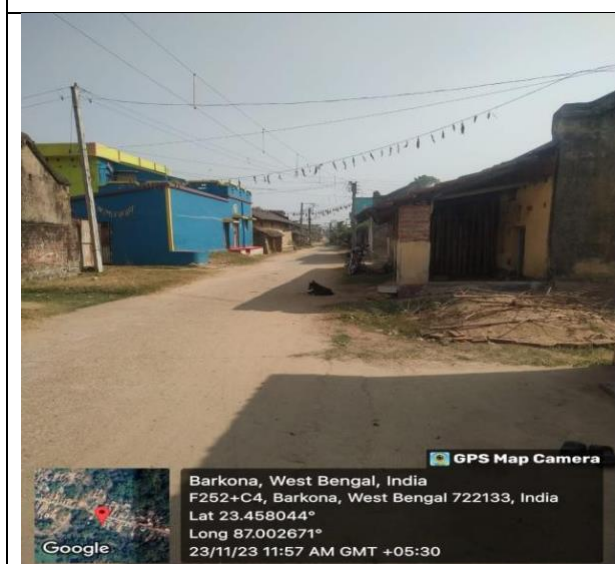
Jain Pathshala & Free Medical Treatment Centre



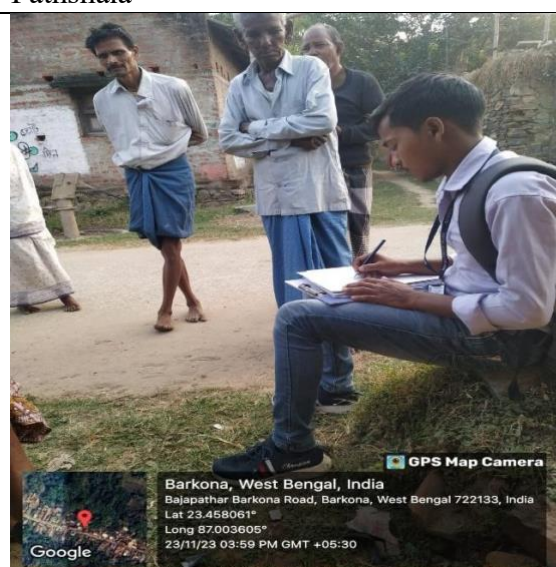
During Field Survey



Dipak Majhi, Local Teacher of Jain Pathshala



Inside Barkona Village, Near Jain temple



Interview with Sarak Villagers of Barkona



Jain Heritage Trail in Nayagarh and Puri Districts: A Historical and Archaeological Perspective

Bishnu Mohan Panda*

Abstract

The districts of Nayagarh and Puri in Odisha are known for their rich religious traditions, predominantly associated with Hinduism. However, Jainism has also left its significant mark on the region through various archaeological remains, sculptures, and temple engravings. This study explores the Jain heritage in Nayagarh and Puri, documenting key Jain relics, their historical relevance, and their syncretic relationship with other religious traditions. The research is based on field visits, inscriptions, and an analysis of temple architecture that reflects the integration of Jain iconography into the broader religious landscape of Odisha.

1. Jain Heritage in Nayagarh District

Nayagarh district comprises the former princely states of Ranapur, Nayagarh, Khandapara, and Daspalla. Among these, the Ranapur and Nayagarh regions have yielded the most significant evidence of Jain antiquities.

1.1 Swapneswar Mahadev Temple, Ranapur

This temple, built in the Kalinga architectural style, consists of a *Rekha Vimana*, *Pidha Jagamohana*, and a *Bhoga Mandapa*. While primarily a Shaivite temple, it houses two distinct images of R̥ṣabhanātha, the first Jain Tirthankara, indicating the temple's historical connection to Jain traditions.

- a) **R̥ṣabhanātha I:** The *Tirthankara* with curly knots, and few strands of which are fallen over his shoulder, is in *kāyotsarga* posture over a double petalled lotus pedestal with the carrier Bull below the pedestal. The auspicious *trivali* mark at the neck, elongated earlobe, ornate *torana* surmounted by a circular decorated halo at his back and *chhatravali* capped by branches of *kevala* tree are the other features seen on the image. Besides, *aṣṭagrahas* (four on each side), *champakā* flowers and full-blown lotus flowers are represented on either side of the Tirthankara. He is flanked by chauri

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bearers at the bottom and flying *vidyadhara*s and musical instrument played in the hands of invisible *gandharva*s at the top.

- b) **Ṛṣabhanātha II:** The image is damaged at the upper portion of the stone slab. He stands in *kāyotsarga* posture over a double petalled lotus pedestal with carrier bull carved below. Twenty-four *Tirthankara*s (twelve on each side) in small size are depicted on either side of Ṛṣabhanātha (central figure). Ṛṣabhanātha is flanked by chauri bearers at the bottom and flying *vidyādhara*s at the top. He has a plain circular *prabhāvali* (halo) at the back of his head.

1.2 Kaunri Devi Temple, Gobindapur

This *Rekha Vimāna*-style temple houses several Jain relics alongside Hindu deities, demonstrating religious integration. Among the Jain sculptures preserved here is an image of *Ambikā* with *Yaksha Gomedha*.

The presiding deity is an eight-armed *Durga* locally known as *Kāmākshi thākurani* or *Kaunri Devi*. Other images found in the temple are *Vishnu*, *Pārvati* and Jain images of *Ambikā* with *Gomedha*.

- (a) *Ambikā* with *Gomedha*: *Ambikā* along with *Yaksha Gomedha* in *rajalilasana* posture are seated over a lotus pedestal. There are seven kneeling devotees below the pedestal. A tree is studded with flowers and a fruit is depicted behind them. A child is swinging in a swing is in the centre. *Neminātha*, the twenty-second *Tirthankara*, appears in *dhyānamudrā*. He is flanked by chauri bearers and garland bearers at the top. The temple is situated in the Gobindpur village on the side of Nayagarh-Khandapada Road. It is around 6 km east of Nayagarh town.
- (b) As understood, seven more Jain images including the images of Ṛṣabhanātha (3nos.), Parśwanātha (1no.), Ajitanātha (1no.) and fragmentary Jain *Tirthankara* (2nos.) were discovered recently from Ranpur area.

Besides the places having Jain sculptures as stated above, there are many important tourist places in Nayagarh district, like *Nilamadhav* temple (*Kantilo*), *Raghunath Jew* temple (Odagaon), *Ladukeswar* temple (Sarankul), Baramulla, Kunaria dam, Maninag of Ranapur, *Dutikeshwar Mahadev*, *Torabola* hot spring, *Ratnagada* waterfall, *Rajgiri* waterfall, *Jagannath* temple (Nayagarh), *Dakshina Kali* temple, Khandapara, Udayapur library, *Gokulananda Dashapalla* along with its adjoining areas.

The sites having links with Jains may be visited along with the above tourist sites of the district.

2. Jain Relics in Puri District

While Puri district is primarily known for Lord *Jagannatha* Temple, the region also contains notable Jain influences. This section documents Jain sculptures integrated into Hindu temple structures, indicating a historical overlap of religious traditions.

Jagannath Temple

A Jain *Tirthankara* image in chlorite stone and in standing *Kāyotsarga* posture is found in a small niche at the entrance (*Beharanadwara*) of the left wall of *Jagamohana* of Lord

Jagannātha temple. He has curly hairs with an *usnisa* at the top and is sitting over a double petalled lotus pedestal whose carrier is covered with the plasters. Chauri bearers decorated with ornaments stand in *tribhaṅga* posture in front of miniature *pidha* temple on the either side of the *Tirthaṅkara* at the bottom.

A circular *prabhavali* (halo) edged with lotus flower design is behind the head and a trilinear *chhatravali* is over the head. Behind the *Tirthaṅkara*, a *torana* decorated with flower and diamond motif is found. Flying *vidyadharas* with garland in hand and drums/cymbals played with divine hands are seen on either side of the *Tirthaṅkara* at the top. Champaka flowers are also found on either side of the halo.

Amruteswar Temple - Tala Beguniapada

It is a renovated *rekha vimana* and *pidha jagamohana* temple of *Kalingan* architecture. Along with Saivite sculptures, one will find a fragmented and head-less Jaina *Tirthaṅkara* image of Sāntinātha in *kāyotsarga* posture over a double petalled lotus pedestal. Out of *aṣṭagrahas*, five *grahas* are only traceable on either side of the *Tirthaṅkara* image. The chauri bearer with fly-whisk stands in *tribhaṅga* posture on either side of the *Tirthaṅkara*, at the bottom.

A two-armed *Sāsanadevi Mahāmanasi* seated in *dhyānamudrā* and lotus in the left hand and right hand is in holding elephants are pouring bhumisparsamudra is over a lotus flower and below the pedestal. Two figure is in the right and a conch in the left side of the deity are seen over lotus flower. A kneeling devotee is seen with folded hands in the water with pitchers over her head. A deer extreme right.

The temple is located on the left bank of the river Daya at the outskirts of the village Tala Beguniapada. It is around 16 km from Khordha on the right side of the road leading from Khordha to Pattanayikia chowk.

Achutrajpur

Many Buddhist and Jain images were found in the area while digging images of *Tirthaṅkaras* and *Sāsanadevis*, and one small chlorite image the area for the foundation of *Godavarish Vidyapitha*. Ten bronzes of Ṛṣabhanātha were found here. According to historians, the images may be of 8th-11th centuries AD. The bronze images are now preserved in the Odisha State Museum and one image of Ṛṣabhanātha is attached in the wall of Dakshya-Prajapati temple of Banapur.

The images kept in the state museum are Ṛṣabhanātha, Chandraprabha, Vāsujyā, Ambika and Ambika with Neminātha.

Balunkeswar Temple – Barala:

It is a *rekha vimana*, *pidha jagamohana* and *natamandapa* of *Kalingan* architecture. The *patalaphuta siva- lingam* within a circular yonipith is the presiding deity of the temple. In a separate small *pidha* temple attached to the inner wall of the temple compound, three images of Ṛṣabhanātha are preserved. They are in *jatabhara* hairstyle and have oval halo behind their heads surmounted with *chhatravalis*. They are in standing in *kāyotsarga* postures over double petalled lotus pedestals. *Aṣṭagrahas*, four on each side, flying garland bearer and cymbals/drums played with hands are depicted vertically one above the other on either side of the *Tirthaṅkaras*.

In case of the first *Tirthankara* image, the carrier bull is carved at the centre of pedestal and a foliated creeper flank on either side of the bull. In the second image the carrier bull is flanked by kneeling devotees with folded hands. The pedestal part of the third image is partially buried but shows kneeling devotee as well as flower buds. The temple is situated at the middle of the village *Barala, Sakkhigopala* tehsil. It can be reached from *Pattanayikia* chowk o Full blown lotus is also seen on either side of the *Tirthankara* image Bhubaneswar-Puri Road and is around 3 km east of the highway.

Sri Ramachandrapur:

In the shrine of the village *R̥ṣabhanātha* at the centre Goddess, a Panchatirthis image with found. *Pārśwanātha* and *Ajitanātha* an *R̥ṣabhanātha*. He is in *kāyotsarga* posture over a double petalled on the right and *Sāntinātha* and Mahavira are on the left side of lotus pedestal along with all the *pratiharys* including the carrier bull The other four *Tirthankaras* are flanked by their respective chauri bearers and mounts. The shrine is located at the outskirts of the village.

Many Jain metal images were found in Kakatpur area, which shifted to Ashutosh Museum of Indian art, Indian Museum (Kolkata), Odisha State Museum, Bhubhaneswar and District Museum, Puri.

Besides *Jagannath* temple, *Loknath* temple and other temples and beaches of Puri town, the district is famous for the tourist places such as *Konark*, *Chandrabhaga* beach *Baliharichandi* temple, *Alarnath* temple, *Satyabadi* (*Sakhigopal* beach, *Ramchandi* temple temple and *Panchasakha pitha*, *Barahi* temple, *Raghurajpur*, *Dandsahi*, *Pipli*, *Chilika* Lake with its tourist places, *Astaranga* sea *Balighai* sea beach, *Jahania* Pir, *Beleswar* beach, *Kakatpur Mangala* *Siruli Mahavir* and *Barla Balunkeswar*.

Conclusion

The Jain heritage of Nayagarh and Puri districts illustrates the cultural synthesis between Jainism and Hinduism in Odisha. The preservation of Jain *Tirthankara* images, *Sāsanadevis*, and temple engravings within Hindu temples reflects a shared religious history. Further archaeological research and conservation efforts are essential to safeguard these historical artifacts and promote Jain heritage tourism in the region. This study contributes to understanding Jain-Hindu syncretism in Odisha and provides a framework for future conservation policies.