The hermits of Samanar Hills

Devdutt Pattanaik hikes up a hill in Madurai to map its height in 2,500 years of Jain history in Tamil Nadu

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I had heard that the nose-ring of Meenakshi, a local manifestation of Parvati, goddess-queen of Madurai, is removed each night as she awaits her consort, Sundareswarar, Shiva, in her jasmine-filled bedchamber. “That ceremony starts only after 9pm,” my friend, an amateur historian, told me. He suggested we use our time to visit the Samanar Malai.

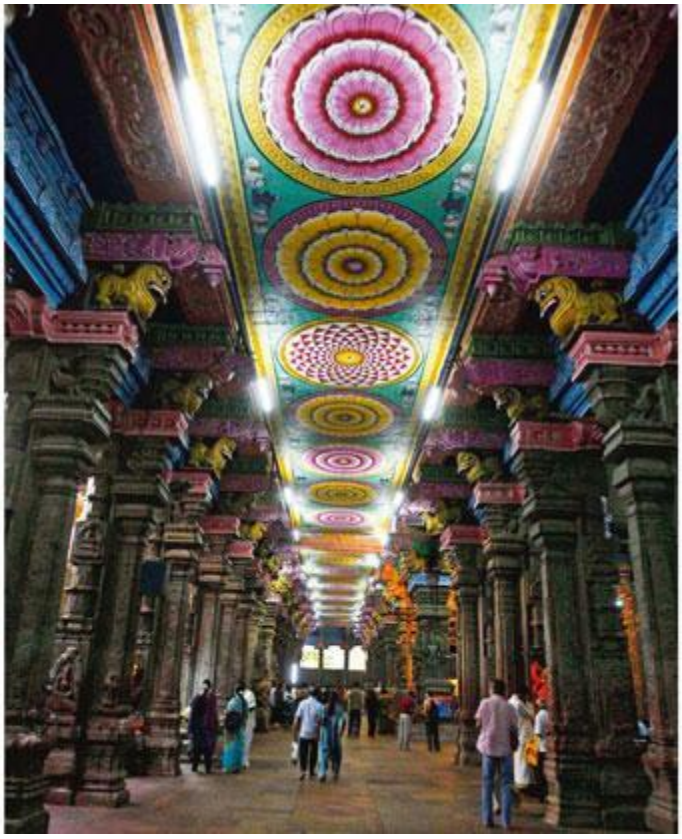
Samanar means Jain in Tamil. It is derived from the Sanskrit *shramana,* which refers to all hermits, not just Jains, or more specifically those who prefer meditation and austerities to Vedic rituals in all matters spiritual. *Malai* is Tamil for hill. The Samanar stands in the village of Keezh Kuyil Kudi, just 15km outside Madurai, and my friend’s suggestion seemed like a perfect detour. So, after a quick lunch, we drove out of the city. Little did I know that going up and down this hill of hermits would be a journey through 2,500 years of Jain history.

A statue of Tamil poet Manikkavasagar from the Pandya period.
Photo: Wikipedia Commons

As we passed rice fields, I remembered reading reports of recent excavations in the fields of Keezhadi, a village in Sivaganga district, near Madurai, by the Archaeological Survey of India that have revealed structures strikingly similar to those found in the cities of the 5,000-year-old Indus-Saraswati civilization. Though these are more recent, maybe 2,200 years old, this discovery does give some credence to the highly controversial hypothesis that the Indus cities were probably built by ancient Tamilians, or Dravidians.

The word Dravidian refers to a linguistic group distinct from the Indo-European (Aryan) group of languages. Europeans turned this linguistic group into a racial group, a theory that was very popular across the world until race became a bad word, following the rise of Nazism. Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada are the four southern languages with Dravidian root—Tamil being the mother language. The Brahui spoken in Balochistan, Pakistan, is a Dravidian language, suggesting the Dravidian language was widely spoken in the subcontinent a long time ago, leading to speculation that it was pushed south by the arrival of

proto-Sanskrit-speaking people (often identified as Aryans, but such a nomenclature is controversial and debatable) into the subcontinent from Eurasia over several centuries from around 2000 BC. This idea is violently opposed by Hindu supremacists, in India and the US, who insist that an advanced homogenous Vedic civilization thrived in South Asia thousands of years ago before being polluted by invaders like the Greeks, the Huns and, especially, the Muslims. We will never really be sure, as long as politics controls scholarship.



The interiors of the Meenakshi Amman temple. Photo: Rupak De Chowdhuri/Reuters

Why does this information matter when one is travelling to the Jain hills of Madurai? It matters because the road is full of posters of Tamil Nadu's two most powerful political parties, who identify themselves with the "original" Dravidian people, before the arrival of fair-complexioned Vedic Brahmins, who instituted the caste system in the state to establish their hegemony. The

Dravidian parties came to power on an anti-Brahmin, anti-Hindi, anti-north platform and still control the vote banks of Tamil Nadu. In this world view, the popular Hindutva icon Ram was an ancient fair-skinned invader, and his enemy, Ravana, was actually a great king of the south. Ironically, the scriptures refer to Ravana as a Brahmin. And, although the Brahmins were driven out of the state by the Dravidian movement in the decades following independence, casteism still thrives in Tamil Nadu, revealing that casteism, howsoever distasteful, has deeper roots in South Asian *culture* than in religion, contrary to the theories popularized by Euro-American scholars.

This begs the question: Was there a Tamil culture before the arrival of Vedic culture in the south? Yes, and we get a glimpse of it at the base of the Samanar Hills itself, where an Amman temple stands in gaudy grandeur next to a lotus pond. We see it surrounded by traditional votive images of guardian gods riding horses. It is a relatively recent construction, and the bright colour and robust style of the imagery is very different from that found in the orderly, refined Brahminical temple complexes of Tamil Nadu. Enshrined within is the goddess, known locally as Amman, or mother.

Mythologically speaking, she is no different from Meenakshi of Madurai. Both are married to Shiva. Both are “hot” goddesses “cooled” by marriage and maternity. But in form and custom, they are vastly different. Amman is far more rural, earthy, and lacks the urban restraint associated with Meenakshi. Next to the ubiquitous Tamil village mother-goddess is the warlord Karuppu-Sami, who is offered meat, alcohol, cigars and *beedis* by his devotees. This was a typical folk shrine found in the Tamil countryside, where, during festivals, I have seen local devotees display a form of frenzied devotion that I have also seen directed at Tamil political leaders and film stars.

Jain carvings in the Samanar hills.
Photo: iStock

Had it not been for the efforts of the now almost overlooked field researcher U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, who in the 19th century scoured the countryside for palm-leaf manuscripts, we would not have known much of this earliest layer of Tamil culture: the Sangam period, when the south was ruled by the Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras, at a time when the Mauryas held sway in the north.

Sangam literature reveals a culture in which kings respected poets, and poets wrote about war and love. War was associated with cities and love with the countryside, with different landscapes embodying different emotions. This division draws attention to the *grama* (settlement) and *aranya* (wilderness) divide found in the *Sama Veda*. This, and familiarity with the *yagna*, indicates that by the Sangam period, Vedic ideas had started percolating to the southern half of the subcontinent, from their heartland, the Gangetic plains, where the Vedas were organized and the Upanishads were composed, 2,800 years ago. Sangam literature has memory of a king who sent food for the "five and hundred", an obvious reference to the Mahabharat's Pandavas and Kauravas, of goddesses like Kotravai, who delights in battle, the handsome Seyon, or Murugan, who is represented as a spear atop a mountain, and the cowherd god Mayon, who wrestles bulls and dances with milkmaids. Were these the forerunners of the classical Puranic deities Kali, Kartikeya and Krishna, or of deities we now address as Amman, Meenakshi and Karuppa-Sami? People speculate, but we cannot be sure.

As we left the Amman shrine complex, I noticed many images there, some enshrined, that looked very old, probably ancient Pandyan images, maybe once part of a Jain temple, now turned into deities by the locals. One is grateful that the images are well cared for, accessible to the public and not vandalized or stolen and housed in some rich man's private collection, though it would be nice if an expert's view was put on a plaque nearby. But do we want all places of worship to be turned into tourist attractions?

As we walked up the steps to the Jain caves, I noticed how this yellow-brown stone hill stands out against the otherwise flat rice-field plain. It has been observed that Jain shrines were more popular in the southern half of Tamil Nadu, ruled by Pandyas, the Pandya Nadu, while Buddhism was more popular in the northern part, ruled by Cholas, the Chola Nadu. This may have something to do with the presence of stone mountains in the south, the preferred residence of Jain monks. These stone mountains with Jain caves, carvings and epigraphy are today at great risk from illegal stone quarrying.

The interiors of the Meenakshi Amman temple.
Photo: AFP

According to Jain lore, Jainism came to the south in Mauryan times. Chandragupta Maurya, inspired by Alexander the Great, and helped by his Brahmin mentor, Chanakya, had established the Mauryan empire, but then became disillusioned towards the latter part of his reign, following a prolonged drought. He became a Jain monk and accompanied his teacher, Bhadrabahu, to the south, to Shravanabelagola in Karnataka. Bhadrabahu's followers spread the Jain way of thinking and living to Tamil Nadu. At the Samanar Hills, archaeologists have found a 2,200-year-old Tamil-Brahmi script—a variant of Brahmi, which is India's oldest script— referring to the contribution of locals to the welfare of Jain monks. This provides material evidence of this settlement's and religion's antiquity.

The oldest major Tamil epics—*Shilapadikaram*, *Manimeghalai* and *Civaka Chintamani*—composed over 1,500 years ago are also Jain and speak of the city of Madurai and its rich merchants whose wealth made local kings nervous. They also speak of the tension between lovers and renunciation as a viable

option for both men and women who are disillusioned by the sensory charms of the worldly life.
Unlike Buddhism, whose followers were expected to become monks, Jainism allowed its lay followers, the *shravakas*, to earn merit by taking care of monks. And so archaeologists have identified 26 caves, 200 stone beds, 60 inscriptions and over 100 sculptures of Jain heritage in and around Madurai, such as the one on Samanar Hills, where I stood.
There are two major caves on Samanar Hills, one more easily accessible, known as Settipodavu, and the other with a rather steep climb, known as Pechipallam.

A fresco of dancers from the Chola period.

At the easily accessible cave, my friend pointed out the rain drip line, an artificial tear above the entrance of the cave, created to ensure that rainwater does not go into the cave but trickles away from it by the side. Then you see the fabulous carvings on the walls—stark lines with minimal ornamentation. The grand image of Mahavir with the image of a lion below him and beside him his guardians *yaksha* and *yakshi*, their feet pointing away from him, and a

grand umbrella above him. His full lips, the slight bulge of what we now call “love-handles” and the straight lines of his arms, his crossed legs and broad shoulders filled me with awe. The underlying sensuality, often missing in modern Jain carvings, was unmistakable. The artisans were following the principles of *shilpa-shastra*, or the treatise of image-making, that seeks to fill the stone images with *prana* or life, a feeling that it is enlivened by breath, and softness. The broad shoulders and narrow waist attest to the fact that Mahavir came from a royal family. The slight plumpness is critical to indicate that the fasting is balanced by enlightenment. Fasting strips the body of life and energy and beauty while enlightenment reverses the process.

I did not visit the higher, more inaccessible cave as it was a steep, hour-long climb. It has a perennial pool of water, a reason why the monks probably favoured this hill. It also has a large sculpture with the images of many *tirthankars*, including Mahavir (identified with his symbol, the lion) and Parsva (identified by the hooded serpent over his head). There is also an image of Bahubali, who is not a *tirthankar*. He is of lesser rank, though he lived much before Mahavir, being the second son of the first *tirthankar*, Rishabha. The story goes that Bahubali was far more accomplished than his brothers, but his competitive spirit and his refusal to bow to those senior to him, in status or age, fettered him to the ground, a thought symbolically represented by plant vines coiling around his feet, tying him down.

A bronze statue of goddess Parvati from the Chola period.

Both caves of Samanar have many inscriptions, in the Kannada and Tamil languages, using scripts such as the old south Indian Vatteluttu script. They indicate a connection between the Jains of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, and a history of a thousand years, for the last ones have been dated to the ninth century. Then the Jain culture started to wane, though unlike Buddhism, it was not completely wiped out. It survived because of the great goodwill created by Jain hospitals and educational services and the refuge offered to political fugitives. Today, there is still a community of nearly 100,000 Tamil Jains in and around Madurai.

As we descended, I remembered the rising number of politically active Jain hermits today, those who support Hindutva politicians and use the affluence of Jain businessmen as a lever to demand abattoirs be shut during Jain festivals, an advocacy unusual for this otherwise private, insular community. They seem to have forgotten the violent Hindu-Jain confrontations of the past, or forgiven them. Lack of awareness, chuckles my friend.

It all started 1,300 years ago, when a new way of thinking emerged in Tamil Nadu: passionate devotion to an all-powerful god. The Nayanars called him Shiva, and the Alvars called him Vishnu. These were the forerunners of the *bhakti* movement that would eventually spread to north India. This new form of Hinduism was very different from the old Vedic form. It gave much more value to tangible stone icons than to intangible chants and hymns. It valorized the householder (*yajamana*) over the hermit and the ritualist. Over time, it inspired the grand Shaivite and Vaishnavite temple complexes of the south, such as the Meenakshi-Amman temple complex, which eventually overshadowed the Jain caves and the Jain way of life in Madurai.

Tensions between the monastic orders and temple traditions were inevitable. The earliest such clash may have been the infamous Madurai massacre of the seventh century, when Jains were impaled by the Shaivites. This incident is reported only 500 years later, in manuscripts dating to the 12th century, and is increasingly being seen as political propaganda. The story goes that the poet-sage Sambandhar converted the local Pandyan king from Jainism to Shaivism after defeating the local Jains in debate, and also by curing the king of ailments. Following this, the king had the Jains killed, or the Jains probably followed the rather controversial Jain practice of *sallekhana*, systematically starving oneself to death, probably in caves and stone beds in places such as Samanar Malai.

As one drives away from the hill of the hermits and returns to the city, one cannot miss the magnificent gateways, or *gopurams*, of the Meenakshi temples. These were built by Nayak kings in the 17th and 18th centuries to display their prowess and power. In this temple, Shiva, the greatest of hermits, serves as consort to the city's queen and patron deity. She brought him south after conquering the north: local Tamil lore that counters the Sanskrit tale of Ram invading the south.

That evening, I, along with hundreds of devotees, witnessed the daily ceremony in which the Sundareswarar rides a palanquin and goes to the private royal bedchamber, furnished with jasmine flowers, mirrors and a swing, to be with the goddess-queen Meenakshi, who waits for him like a good wife after having finished her royal duties. This narrative of the domestication of

the hermit is clearly both a political and philosophical statement, one of triumph over the Jain, and even Buddhist, monastic orders. Whereas the Buddha and the Jinas left their wives in search of enlightenment, at Madurai, wisdom dawns only when Shiva returns to the goddess.

Devdutt Pattanaik is a mythologist and an author. His most recent book is Success Sutra *(Aleph Book Co.).*

http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/TXhGNbzFGhz6jqKcZyQ6gI/The-hermits-of-Samanar-Hills.html