



Jain Culture in Mandya District: Continuities, Transformations and Preservation

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical presence, cultural practices, religious institutions, material heritage and contemporary status of Jain communities in Mandya district (Karnataka). Drawing on archival sources, epigraphic records, gazetteers, census data, temple surveys and oral interviews conducted with community elders and temple authorities, the study maps the evolution of Jain cultural life from the early medieval period to the present. Key findings show a pattern of deep historical roots expressed through temple architecture, inscriptions, agrarian patronage and ritual practice, accompanied by demographic decline and syncretic adaptation in the modern period. The paper concludes with recommendations for heritage preservation, community initiatives and avenues for future research.

Keywords: Mandya, Jainism, Karnataka, Epigraphy, Temple architecture, Cultural heritage, Preservation.

Introduction

Mandya district located in the southern part of Karnataka between Mysore and Bangalore, occupies an important position in the cultural map of south India. While the region is popularly associated with Vijayanagara, Wodeyar and various agrarian histories, Jaina religious presence has left an indelible mark across the district's temples, inscriptions, and local folklore. This study seeks to offer a focused, original account of Jaina culture in Mandya, situating local evidence within broader patterns of Jain history in peninsular India.

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The Objectives Are Threefold

- To document and analyze material and documentary evidence of Jaina presence in Mandya;
- To describe living cultural practices, ritual calendars and institutional life where still active; and
- To propose practical steps for the conservation of Jaina heritage in the district.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Jaina communities in Karnataka tends to concentrate on regions such as Shravanabelagola, Kolar and parts of northern Karnataka. Important general works that frame this study include Sangave's sociological treatment of Jaina communities and John E. Cort's anthropological studies of Jain practices. Regionally, the Mysore Gazetteer and B.L. Rice's *Epigraphy Carnatica* provide indispensable primary material for inscriptions and historical references. Recent state archaeological reports and district gazetteers also record temple remains and inscriptional data relevant to Mandya. However, focused, district-level studies of Mandya's Jain heritage are sparse a gap this paper addresses.

Sources and Methodology

This research combines:

- **Archival research:** Examination of published and unpublished Gazetteers, *Epigraphy Carnatica* (selected volumes) and district-level archaeological reports to identify inscriptional evidence and historical references to Jain institutions.
- **Field survey:** On-site visits to surviving Jain temples, basadis (Jain shrines), pillar inscriptions, and sculptural remnants in Mandya taluks. Photographic documentation and temple plan-notes were taken for analysis.
- **Oral history:** Semi-structured interviews with community elders, priests (where active), temple caretakers and local historians to capture living memories, ritual practices and narratives of patronage.
- **Census and demographic analysis:** Use of Census of India data (latest available public release) to map population trends and the numerical presence of Jain households in Mandya.

Sites surveyed included small basadis in peri-urban villages, ruined temple platforms and the better-preserved centers where communities remain active.

Historical Overview

Epigraphic evidence in the broader Mysore region indicates Jain activity from the early medieval period through the Vijayanagara era and into the Mysore Wodeyar period. In Mandya stone inscriptions recorded by earlier epigraphists refer to land grants, patronage by local chieftains and mention of Jina images and basadis (as recorded in district summaries of *Epigraphy Carnatica* and the Mysore Gazetteer). These records suggest that local Jain communities were integrated into agrarian patronage networks and occasionally benefitted from royal or local donations for temple maintenance.

Architectural fragments and sculptural motifs found in several village sites correspond stylistically with late-medieval Kannada school temple art indicating sustained artisan traditions and the circulation of iconographic templates shared between Hindu and Jain religious builders.

Material Culture and Architecture

Jain material remains in Mandya may be categorized as follows;

- **Basadis and small temples:** Several village-level basadis, typically modest in scale, with garbhagriha (sanctum) housing a Tirthankara image, are present. These structures often show later restorations and additions, underscoring continuous but low-intensity use.
- **Sculpture and iconography:** Stone images of Tirthankaras, yakshas, and yakshinis with identifiable iconographic attributes (padmasana posture, kayotsarga, attendant figures) were documented. Stylistic comparisons place many pieces within the late-medieval (13th-16th century) repertoire.
- **Inscriptions and donor records:** Fragmentary inscriptions recording gifts of land or tax-exempt status for temple upkeep were found reused in later temple masonry and village constructions.

The most visually prominent remains cluster near historical trade routes and riverine settlements, emphasizing the link between settlement density and religious patronage.

Social and Ritual Life

Although overall Jain population in Mandya is numerically small relative to other religious communities, Jaina ritual life survives in several forms;

- **Annual festivals and jatra days:** Local temple festivals (often synchronized with agrarian cycles) continue in villages where basadis are active. These festivals blend classical Jain ritual elements (abhisheka, lamp-offerings) with local customs (processions, community feasts).
- **Community institutions:** Small trust-managed temples, sometimes supported by diasporic families (business communities who migrated to cities), oversee temple upkeep and ritual scheduling.
- **Pilgrimage and visiting patterns:** Devotees often travel to larger regional centers (e.g., Shravanabelagola) for major events, while maintaining local devotional ties.

Oral testimonies reveal patterns of intermarriage reduction in recent decades and youth migration to urban centers, trends that affect ritual continuity.

Economy, Patronage and Migration

Historically Jaina households in Mandya were integrated into agrarian economies as landholders, moneylenders and traders. With the rise of colonial-era markets and later industrialization, many community members migrated to nearby cities for commercial opportunities. Remittances and city-based philanthropy now play a role in sustaining rural temples. The shift from local agricultural patronage to urbanized economic bases explains both the survival of institutional structures (through donations) and the demographic thinning of the in-situ Jain population.

Syncretism and Inter-Community Relations

Field observations and interviews indicate substantial cultural exchange between Jains and their Hindu neighbors. Shared festival calendars, mutual participation in village-level rituals and the reuse of temple spaces during lean periods exemplify this syncretism. At the same time, Jain communities retain distinct ritual markers vegetarian kitchen rules during festival days, particular modes of worship and community dispute-resolution practices.

Contemporary Challenges

Key challenges facing Jain heritage and cultural continuity in Mandya include;

- **Demographic decline and aging congregations:** Younger generations increasingly migrate for education and employment, reducing local ritual participation.
- **Neglect and structural decay:** Small basadis often lack proper conservation, leading to weathering of sculptures and structural instability.
- **Documentation gaps:** Many inscriptions and temple histories remain unpublished or unrecorded, creating risks of irreversible loss.
- **Limited public visibility:** Compared to larger pilgrimage centers, Mandya's Jain heritage lacks tourist attention or heritage recognition.

Recommendations for Preservation and Revitalization

1. **Systematic documentation:** A district-level project to photograph, transcribe and publish inscriptions and temple plans should be prioritized in collaboration with state archaeology departments and local trusts.
2. **Community empowerment:** Support capacity-building for temple trusts in fund-raising, legal protection (trust registration) and record-keeping.
3. **Conservation interventions:** Small grants for basic structural stabilization, stone conservation and protective roofing would significantly reduce immediate decay risks.
4. **Cultural programming:** Local fairs, interpretive signage in Kannada and English and school outreach programs can raise awareness and involve youth.
5. **Digital archiving:** Create an online repository of Mandya's Jain heritage (photographs, oral testimonies, transcriptions) accessible to researchers and the diaspora.

Conclusion

Jain culture in Mandya district represents a historically rooted but changing tradition. Despite demographic contraction, the material record and surviving ritual life indicate continuity and resilience. Immediate documentation and modest conservation actions could secure this heritage for future generations while enabling a richer scholarly understanding of Jainism's regional dynamics in Karnataka.

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