



Archeological Treasures of Kazhugumalai

By A Rangarajan

Kazhugumalai is a quiet place on a road less travelled and is located about 20 km from Kovilpatti. And here we have some archeological treasures that date back to the 8th Century C.E. The Vettuvankoil, a rock cut temple is breathtaking in its intricate beauty. It reminds one of Kailasanatha temple at Ellora, though much smaller. It is incomplete too. In the evolution of the temple architecture of South India and the Deccan, rock cut tradition marks an early beginning. The Mahabalipuram temples too contribute to this rich tradition. Around 7th and 8th Centuries C.E. Rock cut temples were prominent on the architectural scene of India. If Mahabalipuram temples were the pride of the Pallava kings, Vettuvan koil was the contribution of the early Pandiya king Paranthaka Nedunchadayan.

Even as you take your time to let the timeless beauty of this structure soak in, a short walk to the right and a soft climb up will bring you face to face with the sacred spaces of the Jain boulder site. Where you have Thirthankars and other characters from Jain pantheon sculpted on rocks with a unique symmetry and singular beauty. Epigraphic evidence in the form of the inscriptions on the site tells us much about the donors and patrons who helped this sacred site to come into existence. Lisa Owen's remarkable monograph dwells in great depth on the notion of sacred space in Kazhugumalai in the Jain tradition. In the 70s when N Vanamamalai of Palayamkottai published his famous Araichi magazine, he had carried well researched articles. Deciphering one of the inscriptions, it became evident that one Venkashipan was one of the donors to whom a certain stone bed was assigned. These stone beds were for the of the Jain monks who lived in these caves away from human habitation. Mere shallow depressions that were cut out on flat rocks became seats or beds for the mendicant monks. The Jain abode with wonderful reliefs on rock faces are dated to the 8 and 9th Centuries C.E. This perhaps was a great centre of learning and spiritual tutelage. Kazhugumalai is clearly a great site that leads us to reflect on our unique and priceless heritage.

Kazhugumalai may be quiet today but in the 8th and 9th centuries it was bustling with activity, sitting on an ancient trade route and surrounded by great paddy cultivation. It was an important town. It was then called Ilanelchuram, meaning an area surrounded by fertile paddy fields. Kazhugumalai was also called Araimalai.

I would quote Lisa Owen here, from her monograph titled *Demarcating Sacred Space: The Jina Images at Kalugumalai.* "Thus, even in studies that recognize the contributions of Kalugumalai in terms of its sculpture, the way the images are examined as isolated reliefs denies any sense of a "power of place" and how the images and their boulders collectively define Jain sacred space. I argue here that acknowledging Kalugumalai exclusively as a repository of sculpture severely limits our understanding of how these monuments functioned as clear and permanent statements of Jain presence and devotional practice in medieval Tamil Nadu. In this essay, I explore how sacred space is defined at Kalugumalai through its five groups of boulder-reliefs that both correspond and depart from Jain carvings located in more "traditional" examples of rock-cut architecture."

If the past holds out a great significance, the present too has a contribution that shapes a living heritage. Kazhugumalai is also home to a Murugan temple where devotees throng on auspicious days. And festive occasions set that special tempo, people break into the kerchief dance or Oyillattam that draws crowds to this day. This folk art form has a rhythm and form that is so distinct.





