

Jaina Relic Stūpas

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It is a common stereotype of textbooks on world religions that Jains never worshipped the remains of the Jinās, and consequently never developed a ritual culture parallel to the cult of relics in Buddhism. In his well-known study *The Jaina Path of Purification*, P. S. Jaini (1979: 193) recalls that neither “the *Śrāvakācāras* [the medieval texts outlining the rules of conduct for the Jain laity] nor the practices of Jainism give any indication that a cult of relic-worship once flourished within the tradition. No *stūpas* housing the remains of Jaina teachers have yet been discovered.” Apart from isolated myths and legends in canonical and medieval Jain literature, depicting the veneration of the relics of the *tīrthāṅkaras* by the gods, there is no indication of bone relic worship in early and medieval Jainism to date.¹ This report gives a brief overview of recent, somewhat unexpected, findings on the thriving cult of bone relic *stūpas* and the ritual role of the materiality of the dead amongst contemporary Jains. Although classical Jain doctrine rejects the worship of material objects, intermittent fieldwork in India, between 1997-2004, on the hitherto unstudied current Jain mortuary rituals² furnished clear evidence for the ubiquity of bone relic *stūpas* and relic veneration across the Jain sectarian spectrum.³ British Academy funded research in 2000-2001 produced the first documentation of two modern Jain bone relic *stūpas*, a *samādhi-mandira* and a *smāraka*, constructed by the Terāpanth Śvetāmbara Jains. (Figs. 1-2)

Subsequent fieldwork demonstrated that relic *stūpas* are not only a feature of the aniconic Jain traditions (Figs. 3-4), but also of Mūrtipūjaka (Figs.5-6) and Digambara



Fig.1
Entombment of the
asthi kalaṣa, or bone
vessel of Ācārya Tulsī,
Ācārya Tulsī Sakti
Pīth, Gaṅgāśāhar
21 April 2000

traditions.⁴ (Fig. 7) Hence, the initial hypothesis that the contemporary Jain cult of bone relics functions either as substitute or as a prototype for image-worship had to be amended. Modern Jain relic shrines are evidently not only constructed in aniconic Jain traditions as functional equivalents of temples. It also emerged that the Jain cult of relics is not only a feature of lay religiosity, but usually deliberately fostered by mendicants seeking to perpetuate the influence of their deceased teachers through the construction of *stūpas* and the distribution of ashes from the funeral pyre and other memorabilia.

Attitudes toward relic worship (particularly bone relics) vary across sub-sects and between individuals. Most Jains are aware of the doctrinal view that the contact with relics does not contribute to spiritual purification or liberation, but at best to the acquisition of supernatural power (*P. iddhi*, *S. ṛddhi*). Even this is an apocryphal interpretation. Relic worship, although widely and often publicly practiced, does not feature prominently in Jain discourse and official self-representations. It remains a clandestine practice. Yet, Jain relic *stūpas* are not hidden from public view. The construction of *samādhi-mandiras* and *smārakas* for prominent ascetics is a widespread phenomenon. Numerous elaborate and highly visible shrines were recently constructed for the commemoration of deceased Jain saints and for empowerment through direct contact with their sacred remains.

Three types of sectarian attitudes towards relics, manifest in observable practices, were documented. Attitudes vary along the dimensions official/unofficial, collective/individual, body relic/contact relic:

- open or hidden bone relic veneration
- rejection of bone relic veneration, but veneration of contact relics
- rejection of both bone relic and contact relic worship (with or without the distribution of souvenirs, photographs or other memorabilia)



Fig. 2 Entombment of the bones of Ācārya Tulsī (1914-1997)
Gaṅgāśāhar, 21 April 2000

4 Of the fifty-six *samādhi-mandiras* and *smārakas* investigated, twenty-seven certainly contain bone relics. Nine of these cases were identified by Dineśmuni of the Jivarāja Tārācandra Gaṇa of the Sthānakavāsī Śramaṇasaṅgha, who made the results of his own investigation available to the present author on the 26.12.2002 in Udaipur. For case lists, see Flügel 2004a, in press.



Fig. 3 Urn with bone relics of the Sthānakavāsī Pravartaka Marudhar Keśarī Muni Miśrimal (1891-1984) inside the 'bone chamber' (*asthi kaksya*) in Sojat



Fig. 4 Upādhyāya Puṣkarmuni's (1910-1993) bone relics waiting for entombment, Udaipur, 2004



Fig. 5 Bone relic of Mūrtipūjāk Ācārya Indradinnasūri (1923-2002) Preserved by Ācārya Virendrasūri Delhi 18 December 2003



Fig. 6 Mrgāvati Samādhi Mandir, J.T. Karnāl Road, Alipur, Dillī

The principal division is between sects (i.e. monastic orders and their lay followers) which routinely erect relic shrines at the sites of cremation of influential monks (rarely nuns), and sects which explicitly reject such practices. An intermediate position is pursued by groups which preserve only contact relics. Orthodox monastic orders, such as the Jñāngacch, the Āṭh Koṭī Nānā Pakṣa, and the two Sādhumārgī branches of the Sthānakavāsī tradition, oppose both the preservation of bone relics, contact relics, photographs and other memorabilia, and the erection of commemorative shrines or temples, as forms of *jar-pūjā*, or worship of lifeless objects. Individual devotees may nevertheless retain clothes or other physical memorabilia which were left behind by the ascetics at the time of their *dīkṣā*. In particular the hair of a renouncer that is shaven off at home before the initiation ceremony is often collected and preserved by family members, or the coconuts which neophytes sometimes carry in their hands before changing their dress during the initiation ceremony. Varying individual attitudes can be found across the sectarian spectrum.

The perceived hierarchy of memorabilia is based on

the idea of diminishing degrees of substantive connectedness of an object with a particular saint. The scale ranges from body relics (bones and ashes, hair and nails), to contact relics or relics of use (personal possessions such as clothes, "inalienable" objects such as *gaddīs*, souvenirs such as pens, etc.), and memorabilia such as photographs, to commemorative 'relics' (to use a Buddhist term) such as statues. Relics are treated differently with respect to their quantity, alienability, movability, and individual/collective ownership. After cremation, bone relics are generally gathered and preserved until the time of their entombment under the funeral memorial (*samādhi-mandira*). The remaining ashes on the pyre can be picked up by anyone who has an interest in them. Sometimes a dispute arises amongst followers whether the bone relics should only be buried underneath the funeral memorial (either low platforms or platforms with a protective canopy-like structure), or further distributed to second-order memorials (*smāraka*) erected at sites chosen by influential followers. In such a case, bone relics are divided and distributed by the local trustees of a sect according to the instructions of the head of the mendicant order. Second



Fig. 7 Ācārya Śāntisāgara 'Daksina' (1872-1955) Samādhi Mandira in Kunthalgiri which is said to contain his relics

order relic shrines often display the urns containing body relics openly in purpose built structures, while bone relics are always buried at the sites of the *samādhi-mandiras*. Apparently following Hindu practices, sometimes all or parts of the body relics are immersed into one or more rivers such as the Ganges or local rivers. Through their dispersal over a large region, in various ways, body relics demarcate the sphere of influence of the successors of the deceased and transform it into a sacred space.

Bone relics are seen as particularly valuable because their quantity is finite (although relics of famous saints tend to multiply almost miraculously). Ashes, by contrast, are treated with much less respect, since the amount can be artificially increased by adding more wood than necessary to the cremation fire. Small quantities of ash are frequently distributed by the ascetics of most Jain sects to their devotees, either wrapped into paper, or in the form of small amulets made of metal. There are also amulets with bone relics inside, but this is exceptional. Often their availability is restricted to the ascetics. Members of the lay community should never get hold of the paraphernalia of mendicants. Hair, nails or clothes of an ascetic are inalienable objects which can rarely be obtained. The hair of the ascetic and his/her worldly clothes, left behind after initiation, usually remain within the family. The only other relics of use that can be acquired are the pieces of cloth, etc., which eager devotees manage to tear off the dead body of an ascetic during the funeral procession.⁵ The different types of relics appropriated in this way are usually kept at a safe place at home. They are perceived to contain some of the miraculous (*camatkāri*) ascetic powers (*śakti*) of the deceased in crystallised form, and preserved as auspicious objects to increase the health and wealth of the members of the household.

A spectrum of individual rites of empowerment (through contact with a relic or relic shrine) and individual and collective rites of commemoration (with the help

⁵ The contact with the body of an ascetic, even the dead body, offers a rare opportunity for a Jain layperson to get in touch with "sacred matter", a concept which is otherwise rejected (Jaini 1985: 88).

of a souvenir, *mantra* and/or image) can be observed. Recent studies of the popular devotional rituals held at *dādāguru* shrines of the Kharataragaccha and *samādhi-mandiras* of the Tapāgaccha by J. Laidlaw (1985: 65-7), L.A. Babb (1996: 102f.), and J. Laughlin (2003: 178f.) demonstrated the prevalence of worshippers' orientation towards the "magical power" of the famous deceased Jain monks who are reborn as gods and hence perceived to be transactionally present "miracle workers" whose help can be invoked at the stylized footprints (*carāṇa-pādukā*) dedicated to them. In contrast to liberated beings, such as the Jinās, who are transactionally absent and worshipped through reflexive meditative emulation, the *pūjās* to deceased monks are not reflexive, since "the benefits bestowed come from the object of worship, not from the worshiper himself or herself" (Babb 1996: 131). Some of the Dādābārī shrines of the Kharataragaccha were built on the cremation sites of the four *dādāgurus*, while most of the more than four hundred and fifty shrines dedicated to them are merely commemorative shrines. The difference between the two types of sacred sites is yet to be studied.

There is little evidence of explicit collective relic worship at any funeral memorial, only of collective rites of commemoration on the death day of a deceased saint at the location of his funeral. However, at a *samādhi-mandira* which is also a relic *stūpa*, rites of commemoration function simultaneously as rites of empowerment in at least four different ways: through the ascetic qualities of the "commemorative" ritual itself, through the perceived presence of ascetics reborn as gods, and of their attendant gods, who can both help the worshipper who invokes them, and because of the presence of powerful "wish-fulfilling" relics. The potential political efficacy of the structural power embodied in the ritual infrastructure is predicated on these motivating factors. In modern India, bone relic *stūpas* are typical for the Jains. There are no "Hindu" precedents and apparently no contemporary Buddhist parallels. Jain bone relic worship cannot be regarded as a form of Hinduization, since "Hindus" generally do not worship relics.⁶ Buddhist influence has been at best indirect on contemporary Jains, who generally recognize relic worship not as a "religious" but only as a "social" or "socio-religious" practice. In contrast to Buddhist forms of relic worship,⁷ bone relic worship amongst the Jains remains a clandestine, albeit organised, practice. The veneration of the remains of the deceased Jain saints is not doctrinally recognized, and its existence is often publicly denied. Relic worship is an unofficial, somewhat hidden dimension of Jain ritual culture. Even at the sites of relic *stūpas*, rites of empowerment

⁶ Marshall (1951 II: 463-66) speculated that two unmarked commemorative *stūpas* in Sirkap in Taxila must be Jain *stūpas*, since it is known that many Jains lived in Taxila. They must have been Jain, because of the existence of tanks apparently for "ceremonial ablutions" (p. 465). But see Shah 1955: 9f. Why should Jainas engage in external purifications, usually associated with Hinduism? Marshall (1951 II: 465) suggests that "The answer is to be found in the contamination which has taken place in every religion known to us, and which in the first century A.D. was affecting Jainism as much as it was affecting Buddhism".

⁷ Tambiah 1984, Schopen 1997, Strong 2004, Germano & Trainor 2004, among others.

are only performed surreptitiously, as an additional, or implicit dimension of the rites of worship (*pūjā*), homage (*śraddhāñjali*) or commemoration (*smṛtijñāna*), through a variety of ritual means, such as circumbulation. Yet the intention informing “rites of commemoration” is clearly distinguished from the intention informing wish-fulfilling “miracle rites”. The prevalence of this attitude assures that amongst the Jains even today rites of empowerment remain encompassed by rites of purification.

There is no clear answer yet to the question of the antiquity of these practices. Is relic worship a new development in the Jain tradition, a modern apocryphal deviance of practice from precept? Or is it an ideologically devalued but common practice of Jains (rather than a Jain practice) going back to the time of early Jainism? According to research conducted by Dineśmuni,⁸ evidence for the construction of bone relic *stūpas* amongst the Jains can be traced back for at least three-hundred years. But the custom is probably much older. In his discussion of canonical passages on Ardhmāgadhī *ceiya* (*caitya*) and *thūbha* (*stūpa*) collected by Pischel (1900/1998 §§ 134, 208), Schubring (1935/2000 § 25: 49f.) already suspected that the description of the heavenly worship of the relics of the Jinās (P. *jīna-sakahā*, S. *sakthin* = *asthi*) by the gods in the canon “most certainly follows earthly examples” and that the Jains must have “erected *stūpas* since long”.⁹ He remained sceptical, however, about some of the either “untenable” or “inexplicable” interpretations of Jayaswal (1918) of the famous Hāthīgumphā inscription of king Khāravela of Kāliṅga at Udayagiri (Orissa) of c. 2nd-1st Century B.C.E.¹⁰ which offers what seems to be the first epigraphic evidence of bone relic *stūpa* worship amongst the Jains, though no relic chamber was excavated at the site.¹¹ In line 14 of the inscription, the words *kāyya-nisīdīya* or *kāya-nisīdīyāya* appear, which Jayaswal and Banerji (1933: 89) translated as “relic memorial”; though the word *kāya*, corporeal, could also refer to a building, not just to a relic, as critics pointed out.

Although the worship of relics is unknown within the brāhmaṇical tradition,¹² the burial of bones and ashes and the construction of burial mounds were practiced already in Vedic times (*Rg Veda* 10.18.11-12, 7.89.1).¹³ These burial mounds, especially the round structures de-

8 Personal communication, Udaipur 26.12.2002.

9 The commemorative worship of heavenly relic *stūpas* (*thūbha*) is occasionally mentioned in the Śvetāmbara canon, for instance in *Rāyapaseñaijja* vv. 186f., dated 3rd Century B.C.E. E. Leumann 1985: 500-4 noted that the description of the rite of worship, indicates the precedence of *mūrtipūjā*, image-worship, over *ceiya thūbha* worship.

10 Sircar 1942: 206-213.

11 “The Nishīdī at the Kumārī Hill (the Hill where the inscription is engraved) was not an ornamental tomb but a real *stūpa*, for it is qualified *kāyya*, corporeal (i.e. ‘having remains of the body’). Thus it seems that the Jains called their *stūpas* or *caityas* Nishīdīs. The Jaina *stūpa* discovered at Mathurā and the datum of the Bhadrā-bāhu-charita saying that the disciples of Bhadrābāhu worshipped the bones of their Master, establish the fact that the Jainas (at any rate the Digambaras) observed the practice of erecting monuments on the remains of their teachers ...” (Jayaswal 1918: 338f.).

12 Jaini 1979: 298, n. 39.

13 Strong 2004: 15 also points to the charnel houses, or *eḍūka* (*elūka*, *aiḍūka*), mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*.

scribed in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 13.8.1-2, are generally regarded as pre-figurations of the later Buddhist relic *stūpas*,¹⁴ and by extension also of the famous Jain *stūpa* found at Kaṅkālī Tīla in Mathurā.¹⁵ (Fig. 8) A. Führer’s excavation of this *stūpa* in 1889-90 did not reveal any relic chamber or relics, which seemed to confirm that, although Jains constructed “commemorative” *stūpas* at an early date, bone relic worship was never practiced. G. Bühler (1890: 328f.) wrote: “The worship of *stūpas* has, in my opinion, not been borrowed by the Jainas from the Buddhists. It was, I think, the common habit of various ancient sects to erect funeral monuments in the *Stūpa* form to their great teachers (just as the so-called *samādhis* are still built all over India in honour of distinguished ascetics) and to worship them”.¹⁶ Bühler argued that even “the term *chaitya* or *cheia* originally meant ‘a funeral monument in honour of a teacher or prophet’, not a temple, as it is now interpreted” (ib.); but did not discuss the difference between commemorative *stūpas* and relic *stūpas*. *Samādhi-mandiras* and *nisidhis*,¹⁷ that is, small shrines erected in memory of prominent Jain ascetics at their places of *sallekhanā* or cremation, are in evidence from the early medieval period onwards. Yet, no indication of relic worship was ever found at any of the Jain shrines. (Excavations are understandably prevented by the community). P. Granoff (1994: 151, n. 28) noted that there is “evidence from inscriptions that certain monks were worshipped after their death, and that *stūpas* and footprints were continuously dedicated to these monks”, yet “there is little evidence in any of the medieval biographies that the remains of the dead monk were worshipped or that there was a cult of any importance of the *stūpa*” (p. 150). J. Laughlin (2003: 200 n. 523) also suspected that none of these monuments “were *stūpas* in the Buddhist sense, containing the bodily relics of the monks, but were more like cenotaphs”. N. Shāntā (1985/1997: 256, n. 348) was under the impression that the “reformed communities, the Sthānakavāsīs and the Terāpanthīs, who perform no temple worship, do not [even] erect *samādhi-mandiras*”.

This short review of the textual, archaeological and anthropological literature on Jain *stūpas* and relic worship demonstrates that, thus far, academic studies have concentrated only on commemorative rituals and the worship of heavenly gods, not on popular rites of empowerment through relics, which are officially derided. Popular Jain relic cults such as collecting hairs or clothes of ascetics, dead or alive, have occasionally been docu-

14 Parpola 2005: 53-55.

15 Smith 1901. Three further suggested sites of ‘Jaina *stūpas*’, in Udayagiri (cf. Jayaswal 1918), Taxila (Marshall 1951), and Vaddamanu (Kasturibai & Rao 1995), revealed no evidence of relic worship.

16 U.P. Shah 1955: 54 argued that “*Stūpa* worship does not seem to have been so popular amongst the Jainas as amongst the Buddhists, because image-worship seems to have started earlier in Jainism than in Buddhism” and because “the popularity of representations of Samavasaraṇa [the assembly of the four-fold Jain community] ultimately replaced the *Stūpa*-symbolism in Jaina worship” (p. 57). S. Jain 1987: 136f. proposed that Jain *stūpa* worship emerged under the influence of Buddhism, but was confined to the period between the second and fifth century B.C.E. With the success of the Jain construction of memorials such as *stūpas*, *carāṇa caukīs*, *caitya stambhas*, *māna stambhas* and Jain temples, the Buddhist tradition lost its influence. After its demise, the Jains gave the construction of *stūpas* up (p. 140).

17 P. *niśīthiyā*, S. *niśīdhi*, *niśīdhi*, *niśīdhika*.



Ashes and bones of Ācārya Tulsī, preserved by a family in Gaṅgāśāhar 15 December 2002

mented in the footnotes of the sparse ethnographic literature on the Jains. However, they were largely dismissed as “non-Jain” forms of “hinduization”. P. Granoff (1992: 194) by contrast argued that “all worship in Jainism as it centers around images and temples is in some essential way worship of the dead”, in ways “reminiscent to contemporary Hinduism”. L.A. Babb (1996: 103) accepted the functionalist view that even the “commemorative” worship of the Tīrthākaras is “a particular kind of mortuary cult”, rather than an “enactment of soteriological ideas” as emphasised by the tradition itself. Is Jainism as a lived religion essentially a mortuary cult, a cult of gurus and saints? Quite the opposite seems to be the case. Jain doctrine points towards the emancipation from attachment. The dominant forms of ritual practice are routinised forms of religion, unequivocally oriented towards the principles of Jainism, rather than a cult of funeral offerings to charismatic personalities. Even the apotropaic Jain cult of relics, emphasizing physical connection with particular individuals rather than symbolic inspiration, is quite abstract. Essentially it is a form of worship without ritual. The only requirement is the co-presence of relic and worshipper. In the literature, the contrast between Brāhmaṇical ritual materialism and Jain symbolic understandings of objects of worship is often emphasized. Yet, in practice, there is only a fine line between venerating an object as a conventional symbol or as something of intrinsic value. S.J. Tambiah (1984: 203, 335) was one of the first to emphasize that the practical value of relics, in a Buddhist context, is their function as “magical” repositories of spiritual “power”, rather than “symbolic” reminders for commemorative worship. What exactly the words “magic” and “power” designate in this context is an open question. The role of the perceived living presence, or crystallised power of Jain saints in relics, shrines and amulets and the relationship of relics and images in contemporary Jain religious culture is yet to be studied from a comparative perspective. How are relics worshipped by the Jains? A phenomenology of the Jain ritual experience of the special dead and of the attitudes toward their remains promises insights of wider significance for the understanding of the history of South Asian religious culture and art.

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Fig. 8 Jain stūpa on Āyāgapāṭa relief in Kāṅkālī-Ṭīlā