

# **SALLEKHANA IN TAMIL LITERATURE AND THE TAMIL COUNTRY**

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Ahimsa is the supreme tenet of Jainism. The Jain categorisation of living organisms based on senses, body type, mind and endowments (ie. prana, paryapti) is astounding as these categorisations were done thousands of years before the advent of modern science. Recognition of the life form, living and sentient being inside the body is the first step. In Acaranga Sutra, Bagawan Mahavira in the very beginning of the discourse had brought out this fact and declares that endless transmigrations can only be stopped by persons who have realised that sentient life is in all stationary and mobile forms of life. This includes the self and once that knowledge is there, the next step would be to understand the reasons for the infinite births and deaths undergone.

Concept of the pure soul as the reservoir of infinite perception, knowledge, bliss and energy and every soul's aspiration to metamorphosis into that state is the essence of Jain Dharma. The soul is denied of this bliss because of its interaction with karma particles which has been going on for an infinite period of time. Tirthankaras, with Their infinite perception and knowledge have found the way to liberate the soul from karma and attain the Ananta Catustaya qualities of the pure soul.

"Samyak darsana, jnana, caritrani moksha margaha" - is the opening sutra of the Tatvartha Sutra. The Ratna Traya, Right Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct, the aggregate essence of these three virtues leads to liberation. Another uniqueness of Jainism is its analysis of things from multiple points of view. The Ratna Traya are also expounded from the real (niscya) and practical (vyavar) points of view. The real point of view is pure soul, perceiving the soul as separate from the body is real Right Faith, knowing the qualities of the soul and matter is

real Right Knowledge and to experience and being immersed in the self soul is the real Right Conduct. From the practical point of view the Ratna Traya has been elaborately discussed and explained in Jaina scriptures. The qualities of Right Faith, the description of Right Knowledge and the details of austerities and vows that form the Right Conduct are codified in Jaina ethics. Degree of adopting these austerities and vows are also specified for lay people and renunciates, anuvratas for the former and the mahavratas for the later. However, the content of these five basic tenets (viz. Ahimsa, Sathya, Astheya, Brahmacharya and Aparigraha) are same for both. While the householders have certain concessions, the code is unrelenting for the ascetics. The Guna vratas and Siksha vratas are complementary to the anu and mahavratas. The twelve part austerities are necessitated for abandoning violence to self soul and other living forms, to abandon internal and external possessions and plug the hole to stop influx of karma, to start shedding karma, to lighten the load and travel upward to the Siddhasila, the abode of liberated souls.

The ultimate and all encompassing vrata is the Sallekhana which is the highest sadana. Jainism puts great emphasis on the state of mind and passions at the time of death. The negative emotions, such as anger, greed, pride, deceit, etc. lead to the births in hell, animal form and human form with great afflictions. The positive state of mind, such as equanimity towards pain and pleasure, right faith and devotion leads to birth in heaven or as a virtuous human opening a gate for further spiritual development and liberation in a course of few births. Sallekhana is facing death with equanimity and higher spiritual insight. Acharya Pujyapada in his text, Mrityu Mahotsava brings out this fact by stating, "all religious observances, fasting and austerities would be unavailing, if at the last moment of life, at the approaching moment of death, if one does not undertake Sallekhana". The term sallekhana is derived from sam and lekhana. It means noble process of delibulating the body. It is an effort to realise the soul without body.

Abundant examples of emancipation through Sallekhana is available in Jaina scriptures and vernacular jaina literary works of major languages of India. Historical jaina inscriptions found all over India contain many references to Sallekhana undertaken by eminent ascetics and shravakas and shravikas. Tamil Nadu or Tamil is no exception to this as jainism was a predominant religion of the ancient Tamil country. Acarya Samantabhadra is believed to be from the Kanchipuram region of Tamil Nadu. Arunagacheppu, is the Tamil version of his Ratnakarandaka Sravakacar. Scholars ascertain the date of Arungalacheppu as Sixth Century CE (*Arungalacheppu, Dr. K.P. Aravanan, page 7*). Arungalacheppu defines Sallekhana in its aphorisms 145 to 153.

145. இடையூறு, ஒழிவு இல் நோய், மூப்பு, இவை வந்தால் கடைதுறத்தல் சல்லேகனை.
146. இறுவாய்க்கண் நான்கும் பெறுவோம் என்று எண்ணி மறுஆய நீக்கப்படும்.
147. பற்றொடு செற்றமே அற்றம் தொடர்ப்பாடு முற்றும் துறக்கப் படும்.
148. ஆலோ சனையின் அழிவு அகற்றி, மாதவன்கண் மீள்வு இன்றி ஏற்றுக் கொளல்.
149. கசிவு, கலக்கம் அகற்றி, மனத்தை ஓசியாமல் வைக்க உவந்து.
150. ஊனொடு பானம் முறைசுருக்கி, ஓர்ந்து உணர்ந்து மானுடம்பு வைக்கப்படும்.
151. மந்திரங்கள் ஐந்தும் மனத்துவரச்சென்றார்கள் இந்திரற்க்கும் இந்திரரே என்.
152. சாவொடு வாழ்க்கையை அஞ்சித்தான் மெச்சுதல் வாழ்வொடு நட்தார் நினைப்பு.
153. நிதானத்தோடு ஐந்து இறப்பும் இன்றி முடித்தார் பதானம் அறுத்தார் எனல்.

To read the English version of the verses;

145. unbrerable sufferings, incurable disease, senility  
reasons for renouncing food and drink is sallekhana.
  146. at the end of this life time having the thought of  
realising soul's four qualities and shedding other  
faulty thoughts.
  147. all mundane affection, anger and connection with relatives  
are abandoned.
  148. to take with conviction and get the guidance of great saints  
to overcome the hurdles
  149. not to have vasilation and confusion and keep the mind happy
  150. to trickle down food and drink and recollect scriptures  
to keep the body aside.
  151. to leave the body with thoughts of namaskara mantra is to  
redeem the position of lord of the indras.
- The description of sallekhana in vain is also described :
152. fear of death, afraid to live, for self aggrandisment,  
regret to leave loved ones
  153. and a wish for next birth, one who sheds these five  
destroys dravya, kshetra, kala, bhava, bhaava parivarthana

Acarya Maganandi's Padarthasaram (13 CE) was in vogue among Tamil jaina scholars and was available in palm leaf manuscripts for generations. It is a manual of jaina epistemology. The 23rd chapter, Samyama Margana Nirupanam,



of Padarthasaram details sallekhana among other vratas. It is mentioned that Sallekhana is of two types, viz. Jividha sallekhana and Jividandya sallekhana. The former is observed along with daily avashyakas over a period of time and the later is observed near death with performance of pratikramana and

prayachita in the presence of a guru, abandoning all affections towards friends and relatives, with a request for forgiveness in all three dimensions of mind, speech and action, with a committment of mahavratas, giving up the four types of food one by one, meditating upon panca namaskara mantra, twelve anuprekshas, padasta, pindasta, rupasta, rupa-tita and swarupa dhyana and lighten the load of the body.

Fasting to death is also mentioned in Sangam Tamil literature. The date of Sangam literature is debatable, but on a general opinion it is placed between 500 BCE and 200 CE. The Ashokan edicts (273 - 232 BCE) and Mathura inscriptions of Kharavela (150 BCE) refer to the Tamil kingdoms of Chera, Chola and Pandya rulers in the south. Purananuru, the collection of poetry refers to the practice of

fasting unto death. **Vadakkiruthal** is the terminology used for the practice. It was undertaken by great warriors, emperors and poets. The great Chera emperor **Cheraman Peruncheralathan** and the Chola emperor **Karikal Peruvalathan** went to war against



each other at a place called Venniparantalai. In the course of the battle the Chera emperor was wounded by a spear that pierced body from front to back. The wound

at on the back in a battle was considered as a humiliation and the Chera emperor undertook fasting to death (Vadakkiruthal). A poet named Kazha athalaiyar documented it;

புறப்புண் நாணி, மறத்தகை மன்னன்  
வாள் வடக்கு இருந்தனன்; ஈங்கு,  
நாள்போல் கழியல, ஞாயிற்றுப் பகலே!

(Purananuru - 65)

A Sangam period poetess by name Venni Kuyathiyar, showers accolades on the Chera king stating that the victory of the Chera king is far greater than the battle victory of the Chola king.

கலிகொள் யாணர் வெண்ணிப் பறந்தலை,  
மிகப் புகழ் உலகம் எய்திப்,  
புறப்புண் நாணி, வடக் கிருந்தோனே!

(Purananuru - 66)

Chola king, Koperunjcholan, ruling from Uraiyur declared war on his sons who had revolted against him. He was pacified by poet Eyitriyanar and made to realise the sinful act of waging war against own children. The Chola ruler abandoned his throne and undertook fasting unto death by "vadakkiruthal" tradition. On hearing this, his friend and poet, Pisirandaiyar also commenced the performance of "vadakkiruthal". (Purananuru - 212 to 223). Coperunjcholan who was also adept in poetry **expressed his emotions reflecting jaina thoughts** .

செய்குவம் கொல்லோ நல்வினை! எனவே  
ஐயம் அறாஅர், கசடுஈண்டு காட்சி  
நீங்கா நெஞ்சத்துத் துணிவுஇல் லோரே;  
யானை வேட்டுவன் யானையும் பெறுமே;  
குறும்பூழ் வேட்டுவன் வறுங்கையும் வருமே;  
அதனால், உயர்ந்த வேட்டத்து உயர்ந்திசி னோர்க்குச்  
செய்வினை மருங்கின் எய்தல் உண்டெனின்,  
செய்யா உலகத்து நுகர்ச்சியும் கூடும்;  
செய்யா உலகத்து நுகர்ச்சி இல்லெனின்,  
மாறிப் பிறப்பின் இன்மையும் கூடும்;  
மாறிப் பிறவார் ஆயினும், இமையத்துக்  
கோடுயர்ந் தன்ன தம்மிசை நட்டுத்,  
தீதில் யாக்கையடு மாய்தல் தவத் தலையே,

(Purananuru 214)

*Who do not have the right faith without blemishes of doubt and without a*

*strong mind, start performing the meritorious deeds. Those who aim for elephant will find it, those who aim for small bird may go empty handed! If the honourable men aim for the noblest achievement, they shall gain as per their karma. They may reach the heaven to enjoy without activity, and if they do not wish for such pleasures also, they may never have to be born again! And if they are not to be born again, they will achieve the fame as high as the Himalayas, To die with a body devoid of bad karmas is the height of all austerities.*

Nilakesi, the tamil jaina classical literature of comparative religion (5 CE) defends the practice of Sallekhana.

அழிவு காலத் தறத்தொடர்ப் பாடெல்லாம்  
ஒழியல் வேண்டுமென் றோற்றுமை தாங்கொளீஇ  
வழியும் காட்டுமம் மாண்புடை யார்கண்மேல்  
பழியிங் கிட்டுரைத் தாற்பய னென்னையோ.

(Nilakesi - Mokkala Vada - 321).

In reply to Mokkala, a buddhist monk, Neelakesi states that sallekhana is adopted by people who are at the end of their life time and renounce all possessions including body and abandon maintenance of such worldly possessions. No benefit will avail by belittling such noble men showing the path.

Samaya Divakara Vamana Muni, ("*Samaya Divakara Virutti, written by Vamana muni in the manipravala style. Vamana muni has been identified with Mallisena Vamana, the famous Jaina teacher who flourished at Jina-Kanci in the fourteenth century A.D.*" - Prof. R. Champakalakshmi, *Jain Literature in Tamil, online Jainsamaj.org*); in his commentary reiterates that sallekhana is to abandon the regret for dying and to give up attachment towards the body, to observe equanimity and to avoid anxiety. He further alludes the transmigration to a travel and wants the sallekhana observer to pack the food, viz. Panca Namaskar Mahamantra, Ratna Traya and undeterred

samyaktva, for such a travel. He also quotes in his commentary from an unknown literary source;

எல்லாப் படியும் விலக்கப் படாது, எரியால்  
இல்லம் அழியில் அதனகத்தில் - நல்ல  
பொருள்கொண்டு போவான்போற் சாம்போது பற்றற்று  
அருள்கொண்டு போத லறம்.

When the house is on fire, it not possible to remove all articles, only the important and valuable articles are removed. Similarly, one who is in death bed, should be equanimous, desire-less and should carry compassion that is dharma.

Silappadigaram, the Tamil epic of post Sangam period (2 CE) has a reference to the practice of Sallekhana. Kavundi Adigal, a jain sadhvi, observed



Sallekhana and left her mortal body on hearing about the tragic death of Kovalan, Kannagagi, the Pandiya ruler, his queen and the destruction of Madurai city. Earlier she had accompanied Kovalan and Kannagi in their epic journey from Chola country to the Pandya country. During this journey, human sufferings on account of karma was explained to Kovalan and Kannagi, who were sravakas. Kavundi adigal was struck with remorse on hearing about their death and observed Sallekhana as she felt that these people's bad karma led them to her for the journey.

தவந்தரு சிறப்பிற் கவுந்தி சீற்ற  
நிவந்தோங்கு செங்கோ னிணில வேந்தன்  
போகுயிர் தாங்கப் பொறைசா லாட்டி  
என்னோ டிவர்வினை யறுத்த தோவென  
உண்ணா நோன்பொ டுயர்பதி பெயர்த்ததும்

(Silappadigaram - Neerpadaighatai : 79-83)

Sirupanchamulam, is a post sangam period poetic work by the jain author Kaari Asaan. While praising the merits of offering food to the deserving, this ancient tamil work refers to Sallekhana.



வலியழிந்தார் மூத்தார் வடக்கிருந்தார் நோயின்  
நலிபழிந்தார் நாட்டறை போய் நைந்தார் - மெலிவொழிய  
இன்னவரால் என்னாராய் தந்த ஒருதுற்று  
மன்னவராய் செய்யும் மதித்து.

(Sirupanchamulam :73)

There is a tradition of performing annual Nischadi Puja to Acharya Akalanka at Munigiri Karanthai Jain temple near Kanchipuram. During the annual ten day Brahmotsava period, on one of the days a procession is taken to the temple tank bund where the nischadi foot prints of Acharya Akalanka is sculptured and Nischadi (sallekhana) puja is performed. It is believed that Acharya Akalanka observed sallekhana at Munigiri Karanthai.

These literary and other epigraphical recordings about Sallekhana in the ancient Tamil country vouchsafe the glorious jaina presence in the past and social acceptance of the practice of Sallekhana in Tamil Nadu. The practice of sallekhana is to be viewed in the entirety of jaina ethical principles and the fundamental quest for liberation inherent in all jaina followers. Denying sallekhana to jains is denying essential practice of jainism.

In the recent past, Sripalavarniji a tamil jain and former head of jina kanchi and simmanagadde basti jain math and an author of modern commentaries on jaina siddantha observed sallekhana at Sammedasigarji. Sri Gajapathi Sagarji, a jaina scholar with multilingual talent, Sri Adhi Sagarji, founder of Sri Srutakevali Badrabahu Sevalal and Shrutakevali tamil magazine, Sri Veera Sagarji, whose pioneering efforts led to the protection and development of Acharya Kund Kunda Nagar, Poonur Hills and Sri Subhadra Sagarji (former madathipathi of Melsittamur Jain Math) had observed sallekhana. Recently, Smt. Marudevi Ammal, a lay follower accomplished sallekhana in the month of November, 2015.

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