



JAIN ARCHITECTURE OF THE WESTERN GHATS: A Critical Study with Special Reference to North Canara (Uttara Kannada) District, Karnataka

Dr. Ranganatha Rao H. Karad
Associate Professor, Department of History,
Government First Grade Women's College, Shivamogga.

ABSTRACT :

Jainism has contributed significantly to the religious and architectural heritage of Karnataka. While major Jain centres of the Deccan plateau have been widely studied, the Jain architectural tradition of the Western Ghats, particularly in North Canara (Uttara Kannada) District, remains inadequately explored. This paper examines the historical development, architectural typology, stylistic features, and environmental adaptations of Jain temples in the region. The Chaturmukha Basadi at Gerusoppa and Chandranath Basadi of Bhatkal associated Jain sites as primary case studies, the research highlights the synthesis of pan-Indian Jain architectural principles with regional building traditions shaped by the Western Ghats' geography and climate. The study argues that Jain architecture in Uttara Kannada represents a distinct regional idiom that enriches the broader understanding of South Indian temple architecture.



KEYWORDS : Jain Architecture, Western Ghats, Uttara Kannada, North Canara, Gerusoppa, Chaturmukha, Bhatkal Chandranath Basadi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Temple architecture in India serves as an important source for understanding religious practices, political authority, and regional artistic traditions. Jain architecture, in particular, reflects ideals of asceticism, symmetry, and spiritual order while adapting to local cultural and environmental contexts. Karnataka occupies a central position in the history of Jainism, hosting some of the most important Jain monuments in South India.

Despite this prominence, scholarly focus has largely been confined to well-known centres such as Shravanabelagola, Moodabidri, Bhatkal and Karkala. In contrast, the Jain architectural heritage of the Western Ghats' coastal districts has received limited academic attention. North Canara (Uttara Kannada), located between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, presents a unique setting where Jain religious architecture evolved under distinct geographical and historical conditions. This paper seeks to fill this research gap through a systematic architectural study of Jain monuments in the district.

1.1. Aims and Objectives of the Study

Aim of the Study: The primary aim of this paper is to critically examine the architectural heritage of Jainism in the Western Ghats with special reference to North Canara (Uttara Kannada) District, Karnataka, and to contextualize it within the broader framework of South Indian Jain architectural traditions.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To document and analyse the major Jain architectural remains in Uttara Kannada District, with particular emphasis on the Chaturmukha Basadi at Gerusoppa and Chandranath Basadi at Bhatkal.
2. To study the historical background and patronage patterns that contributed to the development of Jain architecture in the Western Ghats region.
3. To identify the architectural typology, structural features, and stylistic characteristics of Jain temples in North Canara.
4. To examine how geographical and environmental factors of the Western Ghats influenced the form, material, and construction techniques of Jain temples.
5. To compare Jain architectural features of Uttara Kannada with those of other prominent Jain centres in Karnataka in order to highlight regional variations and adaptations.
6. To highlight the cultural and historical significance of Jain architecture in North Canara and its contribution to the architectural heritage of Karnataka.

1.2 . Review of Literature

Previous studies on Jain architecture in Karnataka have primarily focused on inland regions and major pilgrimage centres. Scholars such as P. B. Desai and S. Settar have examined the historical spread of Jainism and its socio-religious significance in South India. Architectural studies by George Michell and G. Foekema provide valuable frameworks for understanding temple typologies and stylistic evolution but offer limited discussion on coastal Jain monuments.

District gazetteers and Archaeological Survey of India reports provide scattered references to Jain sites in Uttara Kannada, yet comprehensive architectural analysis remains lacking. This study builds upon existing scholarship while addressing the evident gap in regional architectural documentation.

1.3. Research Methodology

The study follows a **descriptive and analytical research methodology**, combining architectural documentation with historical interpretation.

Primary Data: On-site visual examination of Jain monuments, with special reference to the Chaturmukha Basadi at Gerusoppa.

Observation of architectural components such as plan, orientation, materials, pillars, mandapas, and sculptural elements.

Secondary Data: Books, peer-reviewed journal articles, excavation reports, and district gazetteers related to Jain architecture and Karnataka history.

Epigraphical studies and translated inscriptions where available.

Methods of Analysis

Architectural Analysis: Study of form, layout, construction techniques, and decorative elements.

Comparative Method: Comparison with Jain temples of southern and central Karnataka to identify regional characteristics.

Contextual Interpretation: Assessment of monuments within their historical, religious, and environmental settings.

1.4. Statement of the Problem

Despite Karnataka being one of the most important regions for the development of Jainism and Jain temple architecture in South India, scholarly research has largely concentrated on prominent inland centres such as Shravanabelagola, Moodabidri, and Karkala. In contrast, the Jain architectural heritage of the Western Ghats, particularly in North Canara (Uttara Kannada) District, has remained inadequately documented and critically analysed. Many Jain monuments in this region are either in a neglected condition, partially ruined, or obscured by dense forest cover, resulting in their marginalization within mainstream architectural and historical studies.

The absence of systematic architectural documentation, comparative analysis, and contextual interpretation has led to significant gaps in understanding the regional characteristics, patronage patterns, and environmental adaptations of Jain architecture in the Western Ghats. Consequently, the contribution of Uttara Kannada to the broader narrative of South Indian Jain architecture remains underrepresented in academic discourse.

1.5. Need of the Study

The present study is necessary to address these research gaps and to bring scholarly attention to the Jain architectural heritage of North Canara District. There is an urgent need to document surviving Jain monuments before further deterioration occurs due to natural factors and human neglect. A focused architectural and historical study will help in identifying regional stylistic features and understanding how Jain architectural principles were adapted to the ecological and cultural conditions of the Western Ghats.

Furthermore, this study contributes to heritage awareness and supports future conservation and preservation efforts by providing a structured academic record. By situating Jain monuments of Uttara Kannada within the wider context of Karnataka and South Indian architecture, the research enhances our understanding of regional diversity and enriches the historiography of Jain art and architecture. The study also serves as a foundational reference for future researchers, archaeologists, and planners involved in heritage management and cultural studies.

1.6. Limitations of the Study

Due to dense forest cover and limited archaeological surveys, several Jain sites in the region may remain undocumented. The study focuses on representative monuments rather than an exhaustive inventory.

1.7. Conservation Status and Research Gaps

Conservation Status: The Jain architectural heritage of the Western Ghats, particularly in North Canara (Uttara Kannada) District, is presently in a vulnerable state. Several Jain monuments, including Basadis at Gerusoppa and surrounding areas, suffer from structural deterioration caused by prolonged exposure to heavy monsoon rainfall, dense vegetation growth, and lack of regular maintenance. Many sites are located in remote or forested zones, which has resulted in limited accessibility and inadequate monitoring by heritage authorities.

Although a few monuments are protected under state or national heritage frameworks, conservation measures are often minimal and largely confined to basic structural stabilization. Inscriptions, sculptures, and architectural details are at risk due to erosion, biological growth, and human-induced damage. The absence of comprehensive conservation planning, periodic condition assessments, and community-based heritage management further exacerbates the threat to these monuments.

1.8. Research Gaps:

Despite the historical and architectural significance of Jain monuments in Uttara Kannada, several critical research gaps remain:

- **Lack of Systematic Documentation:** There is no comprehensive inventory or architectural documentation of Jain temples in the district, particularly those located in interior forest regions.
- **Limited Field-Based Studies:** Most existing references rely on secondary sources, with minimal emphasis on detailed field surveys and measured drawings.
- **Insufficient Comparative Analysis:** Jain architecture of the Western Ghats has rarely been compared with inland Jain centres to understand regional stylistic variations and environmental adaptations.
- **Neglect of Epigraphical Evidence:** Inscriptions associated with Jain patronage in the region remain inadequately studied and correlated with architectural development.
- **Underrepresentation in Scholarly Discourse:** Jain monuments of Uttara Kannada are often marginally mentioned or entirely absent in broader studies of South Indian temple architecture.
- **Conservation-Oriented Research Deficit:** There is limited interdisciplinary research linking architectural history with conservation science and heritage management strategies.

2. STUDY AREA: NORTH CANARA (UTTARA KANNADA) DISTRICT

Uttara Kannada District is characterized by diverse topography, comprising coastal plains, river valleys, and dense forested hill ranges of the Western Ghats. The region experiences heavy monsoon rainfall, which significantly influences settlement patterns and architectural forms.

Historically, the district functioned as a cultural and commercial link between the Deccan interior and maritime trade routes. Jain communities, particularly merchant groups, played an active role in the socio-economic life of the region, contributing to the establishment of Basadis and religious institutions. The architectural remains of these institutions provide valuable evidence of Jain presence and patronage in the Western Ghats.

2.1. Historical Background of Jainism in the Region

Jainism in Karnataka dates back to the early historical period and flourished under several dynasties, including the Kadambas, Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, Hoysalas, and Vijayanagar rulers. In the Western Ghats region, Jainism spread through royal patronage as well as mercantile networks. Gerusoppa, also known historically as Nagarbastikeri, emerged as an important Jain centre during the medieval period. Under the rule of Queen Chennabhairadevi in the sixteenth century CE, Jain institutions received substantial patronage. Literary sources and architectural remains suggest that Gerusoppa once contained numerous Jain temples, of which only a few survive today.

2.2. Materials and Technology in Jain Architecture

Jain architecture is characterized by a judicious selection of materials and refined construction technologies that reflect both religious ideals and regional environmental conditions. Across India, Jain builders emphasized durability, precision, symmetry, and clarity of form, while adapting to locally available resources and climatic factors. In the Western Ghats region, particularly in North Canara (Uttara Kannada) District, these principles are evident in the choice of materials and building techniques employed in Jain Basadis.

2.3. The Building Materials:

Stone has been the primary construction material in Jain architecture. In Uttara Kannada, locally available granite and laterite were extensively used due to their abundance and resilience in a high-rainfall environment. Granite was preferred for structural components such as walls, pillars, door frames, and sanctum enclosures, owing to its strength and longevity. Laterite, where used, was often plastered or combined with stone elements to improve durability. The careful selection of stone ensured minimal weathering and structural stability, which was essential in the Western Ghats' monsoon-prone climate. The restrained use of brick and lime mortar in ancillary structures reflects a pragmatic adaptation to regional construction practices.

2.4. Construction Techniques: Jain temples exhibit advanced stone-working techniques, including precise dressing, interlocking joints, and balanced load distribution. The use of dry masonry or minimal mortar in structural components demonstrates technical expertise and confidence in stone craftsmanship. Pillars and beams were carefully proportioned to support flat or gently sloping roofs, a common feature in coastal and hill-region Jain temples. In chaturmukha and square-plan Basadis, structural symmetry ensured even load transfer and enhanced seismic stability. The technology employed prioritized permanence and structural clarity over vertical monumentality.

2.5. Roofing and Climatic Adaptations: Roofing systems in Jain temples of the Western Ghats were designed to withstand heavy rainfall. Flat stone slabs or low-pitched roofs helped prevent water accumulation while maintaining structural simplicity. Extended eaves and covered mandapas protected sculptural and architectural elements from direct exposure to rain.

These technological adaptations differentiate Western Ghats Jain architecture from the towering vimanas of inland Dravidian temples, underscoring regional environmental responsiveness.

2.6. Sculptural Technology and Finishing: Jain sculptural elements display fine chiselling and smooth surface finishing, particularly in Tirthankara images. The restrained ornamentation aligns with Jain philosophical ideals of austerity and non-attachment. Decorative motifs such as lotuses, mouldings, and simple brackets were executed with precision, emphasizing balance and harmony rather than excessive embellishment.

Stone polishing techniques enhanced the visual clarity and spiritual ambiance of interior spaces, particularly in sanctum areas where iconography played a central ritual role.

2.7. Technological Significance : The materials and construction technologies used in Jain architecture reflect a synthesis of religious philosophy, regional resources, and advanced craftsmanship. In the Western Ghats, these technologies resulted in temples that are structurally robust, environmentally adaptive and architecturally refined. The continued survival of many Jain monuments in Uttara Kannada stands as testimony to the technical knowledge and sustainable building practices employed by Jain architects and craftsmen.

3. Case Studies and Architectural Analysis of Jain Monuments.

3.1 Chaturmukha Basadi, Gerusoppa

The Chaturmukha Basadi at Gerusoppa is the most prominent Jain monument in Uttara Kannada. Constructed in 1562 CE, the temple follows a chaturmukha plan, featuring a central sanctum accessible from four cardinal directions. Each entrance leads to a Tirthankara image, symbolizing spiritual universality. The Basadi is constructed primarily of granite, reflecting adaptation to local material availability and climatic conditions. The symmetrical plan, pillared mandapas, and restrained ornamentation align with Jain architectural ideals while showing influences of Western Chalukyan and Vijayanagara styles.

Chaturmukha Basadi is a prominent 16th-century Jain temple in Gerusoppa, located in Honnavar Taluk, Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka. It is famed for its four-faced symmetrical form and stands as one of the rare surviving monuments from a once extensive Jain settlement in the region. The Chaturmukha Basadi was constructed in 1562 CE during the reign of Rani Chennabhairadevi, famously known as the "*Pepper Queen*" for her extensive maritime trade and military leadership against Portuguese forces.

Architectural Layout & Style, Structural Design: The temple follows the "*chaturmukha*" (four-faced) plan a square or cross-shaped layout with four identical entrances facing the four cardinal directions. It is built primarily of grey granite with a symmetrical design characteristic of Western Chalukya and late Vijayanagara architectural idioms. Internal Configuration. At the heart of the temple is a single sanctum (garbhagriha) containing four life-sized Tirthankara idols, usually those of Rishabhanatha, Ajitanatha, Sambhavanatha, and Abhinandananaatha each facing one direction.

The interior includes navaranga halls, antaras (vestibules), and a star-shaped raised base that also functions as a circumambulatory path. Each entrance has carved lintels featuring Tirthankaras, except the south gateway, which bears a Gajalakshmi figure showing shared religious aesthetics of the era.

Decorative & Sculptural Elements:

The halls are supported by pillars with square bases and lotus-carved overhanging brackets — typical of late medieval South Indian stonework. At each doorway stand high-relief Dvarapalas (guardian figures) with distinctive attire and ornamentation. The temple also houses sculptures of Jwalamalini, Virabhadra, and Ganesha, indicating *syncretic inclusion* of motifs beyond strictly Jain iconography.

Cultural & Religious Significance

1. **Religious Role:** Chaturmukha Basadi is dedicated to Jainism, specifically the Digambara sect, and remains a symbol of Jain religious presence on Karnataka's west coast. Festivals such as Mahavir Jayanti are celebrated here, demonstrating that the temple continues to hold worship and community identity roles in the region.
2. **Royal Patronage & Heritage:** The temple's establishment under Rani Chennabhairadevi aligns with the broader pattern of religious patronage by regional rulers who used temple building to express political authority, cultural identity, and economic power. Gerusoppa itself was a thriving centre of Jainism with extensive inscriptions, ruins, and multiple Basadis a testament to the historical *socio-religious landscape*.
3. **Current Condition & Preservation:** Although once part of a vast Jain enclave, most of Gerusoppa's Jain structures are lost or in ruins. Chaturmukha Basadi is one of the few standing remnants and is considered an important heritage site yet sometimes remains less well-known to mainstream tourism circuits. Efforts for conservation, beautification, and archaeological study have been noted, but challenges persist due to vegetation overgrowth and structural decay in surrounding areas.

3.2. Jattappa Nayakana Chandranatheshwara Basadi:

Overview & Historical Context:

Chandranath is an ancient Jain temple located in the Bhatkal region of Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka. This part of coastal Karnataka historically formed a vibrant hub of religious pluralism, trade, and temple building, particularly during the medieval period, including the Vijayanagara era. Although exact construction records are sparse, the Basadi is typically dated between the 12th and 16th centuries CE based on architectural style and comparative studies with nearby Jain structures. Historically, the region around Hadavalli a short distance from Bhatkal was once a noted Jain cultural and architectural centre, with multiple Basadis and stone idols carved during medieval times.

Architectural Features:

Layout and Structure

Orientation & Plan: The temple faces east, a characteristic typical of many Jain Basadis, symbolising illumination and spiritual progress. The structure comprises two primary blocks (eastern and western) linked by a central porch. The western block contains the main shrine and halls, including spaces for worship and circulation. The eastern block functions as a Dwara-mandapa (entrance porch), marking the transition from outside world into the sacred space.

Construction and Style

The temple is constructed largely of local stone masonry, with stone slab roofing and classic perforated screens that allow ventilation — a practical adaptation to the coastal climate and monsoon conditions of the Kanara region. The two-storeyed layout, with overlapping stone slabs forming sloped roofs, resembles some stylistic elements of wooden temples found in hill regions — a rare form when

executed in stone. Engaged pillars and lintels support broad stone beams, while laterite bricks fill secondary wall spaces in some sections.

Sculptural and Decorative Details

The Basadi incorporates stone perforated screens and engaged pillars with simplistic carving motifs, balancing structural needs with ornamentation. In front of the temple stands a dwaja-stambha on a raised platform, a feature sometimes found in larger temple complexes to mark sacred entrances. A nearby Yaksha-Brahma Khamba (pillar) with supporting lintels is part of the complex and reflects the ritual landscape around the temple.

Religious Significance

The Basadi is dedicated to Lord Chandranath or Chandranatha Swami, one of the 24 Tirthankaras of Jainism. The shrine would have served as a pilgrimage destination and community worship centre for local Jain devotees — especially during the medieval period when this part of Karnataka hosted numerous Jain settlements. Some descriptions and comparative studies suggest that the garbhagriha (sanctum) might house or once housed images of multiple Tirthankaras, potentially including Rishabhanatha, Chandranatha, and Mallinatha though detailed epigraphic studies remain limited.

3.2 Other Jain Architectural Remains

Remnants of additional Basadis around Bhatkal indicate the existence of a larger Jain religious complex. These structures generally exhibit simple square plans, minimal superstructure, and emphasis on interior sacred space. The architectural simplicity reflects both Jain philosophical principles and regional building practices.

3.3. Iconography and Decorative Elements:

The iconography of Jain temples in Uttara Kannada adheres to canonical Jain norms. Images of Tirthankaras are depicted in padmasana or Kayotsarga postures, devoid of excessive ornamentation. Decorative motifs such as lotus medallions, plain mouldings, and modest pillar brackets are commonly observed. This aesthetic restraint reinforces the ascetic ideals central to Jain philosophy.

4. CONCLUSION

The Jain architecture of the Western Ghats demonstrates a localized adaptation of established Jain architectural forms. Environmental constraints, availability of materials, and regional patronage shaped a distinct architectural expression. Unlike the monumental Jain centres of southern Karnataka, the temples of Uttara Kannada emphasize structural stability, spatial clarity, and symbolic symmetry. The decline of Jain patronage in the later medieval period and the encroachment of forest landscapes contributed to the neglect of many monuments. Nevertheless, the surviving temples remain significant for understanding the regional diversity of Jain architecture in India.

Jain architecture in North Canara District represents an important yet under-represented component of Karnataka's architectural heritage. The monuments of Gerusoppa illustrate how Jain religious architecture adapted to the environmental and cultural context of the Western Ghats. Systematic documentation, conservation efforts, and further interdisciplinary research are essential for preserving and interpreting this heritage. This study contributes to existing scholarship by highlighting the architectural and historical significance of Jain monuments in Uttara Kannada.

The Basadi forms part of a cluster of Jain architectural remnants in and around Bhatkal and Hadavalli, including other Basadis such as Parshwanatha and Neminatha Basadis and the Padmavathi temple which together indicate a once flourishing Jain community. This region's strategic position on the Arabian Sea coast facilitated trade and cultural exchange during the medieval period, including the Vijayanagara Empire's influence, which implicitly supported diverse religious communities.

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