

DVD documents all ancient Jain settlements across Tamil Nadu

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Chennai: Although Tamil Nadu has more than 450 Jain sites, only a few have been properly documented. Many sites lie abandoned and neglected, giving room for vandalism. Six years ago, when K Ramesh Kumar, a research assistant with the French Institute of Pondicherry, climbed a hill which had abandoned Jain sites, he never thought he would go on to photo-document all the sites in the state. With the help of a team of experts from the FIP, Kumar has now produced a DVD containing more than 8,000 photographs of the Jain sites. This is the first time a DVD is coming up with photographs and basic details of all the sites.

"I have documented 459 sites, including 79 sub sites, comprising structural and cave temples, rock beds, inscriptions, converted sites and stray sculptures. Special emphasis has been laid on the iconography of the 24 Tir-



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thankaras and associated gods, Jain rituals and festivals and their role in the development of Tamil language," said Kumar.

Jainism was once a major religion in Tamil Nadu and other parts of India. But now Jains comprise a minuscule 0.13% of the state's population. "The Jains played a key role in the development of Tamil culture since the 3rd century BCE. But many Jain monuments are in ruins, and they are disappearing due to lack of maintenance and care.

So the need was felt to document all the existing Jain monuments by undertaking a comprehensive field survey and preserving for posterity an important aspect of the country's culture, at least through digital archives," he said.

Nalini Balbir and Karine Ladrech of Paris University, and N Murugesan, researcher of the FIP, were the other members in the team that worked on the DVD titled "Jain Sites of Tamil Nadu." Jainism flourished all

over the state, predominantly in Villupuram, Kanchipuram, Vellore, Tiruvannamalai, Cuddalore and Thanjavur districts. "Many Jain sites lie in remote areas. Exploring them was my first challenge. The main idea is to show the growth and development of Jainism in Tamil Nadu. We have included basic materials about the rituals and festivals of Jains in the DVD. The spatial distribution of Jain temples and rock cut caves are located on a map of Tamil Nadu with GPS points," he said. There are three ways one can search the Jain monuments on the DVD. One is through the 'Site' option by entering the district, taluk or name of the site. Another way is through 'Map' which provides a geographical overview of the sites. The third option is 'Search' by entering the key word. The icons are grouped into layers such as Temples, Rock shelters, Converted sites, Sculptures, Associated Sites and Inscriptions.