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THE JAINA GODDESS PADMĀVATI IN KARNATAKA

Robert Zydenbos

Abstract:
Stories about Padmāvati played an important role in the founding of the Ganga Dynasty (ca. 350-1000 C.E.) and the Hoysala Dynasty (ca. 950-1350 C.E.) in what is now the modern state of Karnataka. Although not without its critics, goddess worship has been integral to Jainism as practiced in south India for more than a millennium. This article surveys primary and secondary literature written about Padmāvati and describes worship at the main shrine dedicated to her, located in Hombuja in central Karnataka.

Key Words: Padmāvati, Karnataka, yakṣa worship, Hombuja, Humcha, Pārśvanātha, Dharaṇendra, Mahāpurāṇa

The academic study of Jainism in the western world has until recent times mainly focused on Jaina philosophy and the so-called ‘high religion’ that finds its expression in the veneration of the monks and nuns who are the supreme religious authorities in the Jaina community. This is often termed the mokṣamārga aspect of the religion: the part of the religion that constitutes the eschatological path to mokṣa or liberation from saṃsāra, the seemingly endless chain of rebirths, a concept that is common across the main religions that originated in South Asia. But Jainism is not only a conceptual framework for persons who strove toward this ultimate goal of liberation from all that is worldly: it is the religious worldview of a few million laypeople today, whose immediate, primary concern is not to attain liberation.

Jainism was also the religion of some of the greatest and historically most important royal families of the Kannada-speaking part of India (which henceforth I will conveniently call ‘Karnataka’), which came to be the intellectual homeland of the Digambara form of Jainism. Important Jaina centers in Karnataka, such as Shravanabelagola (Śravaṇabelagola\(^1\)), Hombuja, Moodbidri and Kanakagiri, became focal points of philosophical and literary activity in the Sanskrit, Prakrit and Kannada languages. Among the most prominent royal families that were based on this part of India are the Rashtrakutas (8th to 10th centuries CE) and Chalukyas (10th to 12th centuries CE). Additionally, the rulers of the Ganga dynasty, to whom we owe the colossal image of Bāhubali in

\(^1\) Because I am discussing a religious phenomenon in Karnataka, using information in the Kannada language, I will transliterate relevant names and titles as they are found in Kannada script, hence ‘Padmāvati’, ‘yakṣi’, ‘Śrutādevī’ etc., and not ‘Padmāvati’, ‘yakṣi’, ‘Śrutadevi’ etc. as found in Sanskrit and several other Indian languages. Sanskrit titles and terms are given in the usual transliteration, and names for which common ‘English’ spellings (i.e., in Latin script) exist are given in those spellings.
Shravanabelagola, who were known to be staunch Jains and were perhaps the longest-lived royal dynasty in Indian history (approximately 350-1000 CE). The Jaina goddess Padmāvati plays a role in the founding myth of the mighty Hoysala dynasty, which ruled a large portion of southern India between the 10th and 14th centuries CE: we are told that its founder Saḷa, as a young man, was attacked by a tiger, and his guru, a Jaina monk, told him to strike it in self-defense ("poy, Saḷa"). Saḷa did so, and it turned out that Padmāvati had assumed the form of the tiger to put his courage to the test. There is a similar legend about the Gangas: “The Gaṅga family owed its origin and progress to the political and spiritual guidance of the adept Siṃhanandi, promoter of the Gaṅga kingdom, who caused by his spiritual powers the goddess Padmāvatīdevi to appear, obtained a boon and gave the Gaṅgas the sword and the whole kingdom.”

When I first witnessed the worship of Jaina goddesses in Karnataka and wrote about it some thirty years ago, many of my readers were puzzled. A common reaction was to dismiss this phenomenon as ‘not genuine Jainism’, because it seemed to contradict some fundamental Jaina ideas. It was assumed to be something fundamentally alien, an ‘import from Hinduism’ (whatever that may mean). This judgment seemed to be supported by several critical authors: classical ones who played down the importance of the worship of the goddesses, or more modern ones such as Pandit Todarmal, who in his Mokṣamārgaprakāśaka flatly condemned it. Typical for many academic scholars in recent times are statements such as the following, taken from a book by T.G. Kalghatgi:

Apart from the worship of Tīrthankaras, we find a pantheon of gods who are worshipped and from whom favours are sought. The cult of the Yakṣinī worship and of other attendant gods may be cited as examples. This type of worship is often attended by the occult practices and the tantric and mantric ceremonialism. Dr. P.B. Desai shows that in Tamilnad Yakṣinī was allotted an independent status and raised to a superior position which was almost equal to that of the Jina. In some instances, the worship of Yakṣinī appears to have superseded even that of Jina. Padmāvati, Yakṣinī of Pārśvanātha, has been elevated to the status of superior deity with all the

3 Todarmal 1978: 173. Todarmal lived in the eighteenth century and can be considered the most influential author in the aniconic Digambara Terāpantha sect (Cort 2002: 55-56). His condemnation of the worship of kṣetrapālas, Padmāvati (here explicitly and exemplarily mentioned) and other kudeva or ‘false gods’ is crude in a rather puritanical, one could even say: fundamentalist manner, as for him only the pañcagarametreṣṭhins are truly worshippable beings, and he does not even try to understand the rationale behind these practices.
ceremonial worship, in Pombuccapura in Mysore area. These forms of worship must have arisen out of the contact with the competing faiths and with the purpose of popularising the Jaina faith in the context of the social and religious competition. [...] Jainism had to compete with the other Hindu creeds. Yakṣi form of worship must have been introduced in order to attract the common man towards Jainism, by appealing to the popular forms of worship. However, such forms of worship are foreign to the Jaina religion.  

The author then compares this with a parallel development in Buddhism, such as led to “inconceivable changes” like “the Tantric forms of worship in Tibetan Lamaism.” On the other hand, as the contemporary Digambara Jaina monk Kunthusāgara notes, numerous classical authors not only approved but actively encouraged the practice of goddess worship, among them Devasenācārya, Vāmadeva, Pūjyapāda, Sakalakīrti, Vāsunandin, Raviśenācārya, Somadevasūri, Nemicandra Siddhāntacakravartin a.o. Kunthusāgara also points out that the yakṣas and yakṣi-s have had a place in Jaina cosmology since time immemorial and that according to traditional hagiography they occupy special positions of honour at the side of a Tīrthaṅkara in the samavasaraṇa, the public preaching in which the newly enlightened soul teaches the world. In any case, the tradition of goddess worship is firmly entrenched in Karnataka and means very much to the traditional Digambaras, who are the vast majority of the Jaina population there. And it also has a very long history.

**The yakṣas and yakṣi-s**

Early Jaina literature mentions yakṣas quite favourably: one of the aṅgas of the Śvetāmbara canon mentions that Mahāvīra preferred to spend the nights in yakṣasthānas and shunned the sacrificial ritual grounds of the brahmins, obviously because of the violence that was an integral part of the Vedic sacrificial cult. The yakṣasthānas are described as buildings where divine beings are worshipped by means of flowers and other non-violent offerings, and here we may have the first description of the standard type of temple that today is found all throughout the Indic cultural part of the world.

The fourth chapter of the *Tattvārthasūtra*, the main systematic doctrinal text of Jainism, deals with various categories of

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4 Kalghatgi 1969: 177-178. The quote is verbatim, without idiomatic improvements.
6 Kunthusagara 1983: 27.
7 Kunthusagara 1983: 2.
devas or divine beings, among them the category that is called vyantara. Among modern translators, Nathmal Tatia has translated the word vyantara as “forest god,”\(^8\) and S.C. Jain as “peripatetic deva” because they have “habitations in various places.”\(^9\) This second translation seems more in agreement with the etymology of the word, which suggests that the vyantarās are “gods that reside everywhere”, and this also seems to be the case with the yakṣas, who in Tattvārthasūtra 4:11 are mentioned as a sub-category of vyantarās. Tatia translates yakṣa as “treasure keeper”, perhaps because the same word is used in such a sense in brahminical literature, e.g., with reference to Kubera. (In Jainism, Kubera is considered the attendant yakṣa of the 19th Tīrthankara, Mallinātha, but he is practically never met with in actual ritual practice.)

The older commentaries on the Tattvārthasūtra in Sanskrit have very little to say about these divinities; but typically a commentary in Old Kannada, the Tattvaratnapradīpīke of Bālacandrādēva (who must have lived and worked in the Śrāvaṇabelagolā area in the latter half of the 12th century CE) has quite a lot to say: not just a few lines, but a full 6 pages in print. This underlines the great increase of interest in the dēvas in the period in which Bālacandra worked in Karnataka.

We will probably not learn very much from a further study of what the oldest Jaina literature has to say about yakṣas and yakṣis. Although many questions are as yet unanswered, it is clear that the importance of the yakṣis in Jainism in Karnataka increased significantly toward the end of the first millennium CE, culminated in writings such as Malliśena’s Bhairavapadmāvatīkalpa (dated 1067 CE), and yakṣi worship has remained one of the main features of Digambara Jainism in Karnataka ever since. Yakṣi shrines are found in all older Jaina temples, and also in newly built temples one will find a subordinate shrine to a goddess. In some larger temple complexes, the goddess may have a temple dedicated to her alone.

In theory there are at least 24 yakṣi-s, as the ‘goddesses’ of Jainism are usually called, together with their 24 male counterparts, the yakṣas, who are considered attendants of the 24 Tīrthankaras, the foremost teachers of Jaina doctrine and the holiest persons in the religion.\(^10\) These play roles of varying significance in puranic accounts of the lives of the various Tīrthankaras.\(^11\)

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\(^{8}\) Tatia 1994: 98.
\(^{9}\) Jain 1960: 112.
\(^{10}\) Actually, there are still more than these 48 yakṣa-s and yakṣi-s. For instance, the ancient Indian goddess Sarasvati, who is revered as a goddess also in Jainism, is not considered the attendant yakṣi of any Tīrthankara. See n. 13.
\(^{11}\) Nagarajaiah (1977: 176) writes that it was not until the 5th c. CE that the Tīrthankaras were depicted together with their yakṣa and yakṣi in sculptures in Karnataka. By the 9th c., the association of each Tīrthankara with a particular yakṣa and yakṣi had become established.
are not yet entirely clear, only three among these twenty-four, namely, Jvālāmālini, Kūṣmāṇḍarini, and above all Padmāvatī, are widely worshipped in Karnataka. They have clearly very different personalities and therefore attract different devotees. Among these three, however, it seems that Padmāvatī has enjoyed a greater popularity than any other yakṣī, as is evinced by the number of images of her that are found throughout Karnataka as well as her prominence in folk literature.

**Literature About Padmāvatī**

Outside India, the best-known text about Padmāvatī is the Jaina tantric text *Bhairavapadmāvatīkalpa*, which was published as part of M.B. Jhavery’s 1944 book *Comparative and Critical Study of Mantrashastra*. In his lengthy introduction, Jhavery mentions various examples from literature of how certain yakṣis attend on ascetics who have mastered mantras, and how certain śāsanadetavās teach mantras to people. Jhavery gives bits of anecdotal information about a select number of māntrikas or persons who had mastered the use of mantras from the time of Mahāvīra up to the 20th c. CE, most of them Śvetāmbaras from northern India, presumably because he relied on local northern records as sources; but there are also stories of persons with māntrika accomplishments among the Digambaras in southern India, and I myself have been told stories of persons, both living and recently passed away, who possessed such powers. The published *Bhairavapadmāvatīkalpa* of Jhavery’s book is by Malliṣeṇa (11th c. CE), a Digambara ācārya who was the pupil of a pupil of Ajitasena, the spiritual teacher of

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12 The goddess Cakrēśvari follows as a relatively little-known fourth, and of course Sarasvati is considered a yakṣi as well, as Śrutadēvi or the ‘goddess of scripture’. Jvālāmālini as the yakṣi of Tīrthaṅkara Candranātha seems particularly prominent in tales about rivalry with Śaiva Hinduism, a rivalry which led to a sharp decrease in the percentage of Jainas in the population of the Kannada-speaking part of India.

13 S.P. Padmaprasad provides a statistic of the materials he had collected for his study of Karnataka Jain folk literature. 16% of his materials are stories, 84% are folksongs. 35% are folksongs about yakṣis, and among these, 29% are about Padmāvatī and the remaining 6% about all other yakṣis together (Padmaprasad 2009: 362). Padmāvatī and her consort Dharaṅendra are depicted in the caves at Aihole and Badami and in hundreds of temples throughout Karnataka, and Padmāvatī figures prominently in a category of folk stories known as nōmpikathegaḷu, (Nagarajaiah 1977: 183) which describe how certain rituals (roughly corresponding to what in certain Hindu traditions are called ‘vratas’), usually involving mildly renunciatory acts such as fasting, are carried out, what results they have, and what the origins of these rituals are.

14 For instance, one Mānadevasūri (3rd c. CE) had forgotten a mantra, but the goddess Ambikā taught it to him again. See Jhavery 1944: 197.

king Rācamalla Gaṅga and his minister Cāmuṇḍarāya who had the world famous statue of Bāhubali (the Gommaṭēśvara) at Śravanabelagolā sculpted in the late 10th century.

Jhavery is of the opinion that the development of mantraśāstra or the art of the use of mantras among the Jainas was the result of a variety of societal factors: he mentions the increase in temple building, recurrent famines, foreign invasions, internal feuds, the tendency among ascetics to no longer live in forests but in populated areas, friendships of ascetics with kings, an anxiety to protect Jainism against other religions, the desire to succeed in public debates (he mentions how Haribhadrastūrī in the 8th century CE reportedly defeated Buddhist opponents and their goddess Tārā with the help of goddess Ambikā\textsuperscript{16}) and a felt need for magical powers to meet disputationists from “rival religions” who are said to possess such powers. All this, he writes, contributed “to the rise and continuance of the Caityavāsis for nearly a thousand years.”\textsuperscript{17} A caitya (Prakrit ceiya) is nowadays commonly considered to be a temple in general, but originally was a specific type of temple: “[t]he abode of ghosts or infernal gods, the memorial or temple which was erected in olden times on the funeral pyre or in a garden and people used to worship these with a view to get their worldly desires fulfilled.”\textsuperscript{18} One can easily recognize in the ‘Caityavāsis’ or ‘temple-dwellers’ the forerunners of the present-day bhaṭṭārakas, who represent a still very much living tradition among the Digambaras in southern India today.\textsuperscript{19} A bhaṭṭāraka (literally ‘learned person’) in Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Maharashtra is the head of a Digambara maṭha, i.e., a monastery-like institution that usually comprises, among other things, a library, a school for the clergy, and, most importantly in our present context, at least one temple, often a temple complex. The main kṣetras or holy places of the three most popular yākṣis in Karnataka are Hombuja (Humcha), Simhanagadde (Narasimharajapura) and Shravanabelagola, which are also the locations of the three most prominent maṭhas. The bhaṭṭārakas, whose importance for the growth and continuation of the Jaina religion can hardly be underestimated, are the custodians of the main temples. Till today the bhaṭṭārakas are considered the chief learned authorities concerning all matters of ritual, and instead

\textsuperscript{16} Jhavery 1944: 203-4.
\textsuperscript{17} Jhavery 1944: 203.
\textsuperscript{18} Ratnachandraji 1988, vol. 2, p. 737 col. 2. The Hindi text in this quadrilingual dictionary reads, more accurately: “yakṣa vagairaha vyantaradevatāke āyatana-sthāna; citā ke īpāra maṇḍīra yā anya rūpa menī banāī yā huā śmāraka cinha. Śaṃśārī loga ināki isā loka ke sukhomā kī ichāse upāsanā karate hain”; in other words: not an “abode of ghosts or infernal gods”, but an abode of yakṣas and other vyantaradevatās.
\textsuperscript{19} For more about the institution of the bhaṭṭāraka, see Dundas 2002: 123-125. About the institution in northern India: Johrapurkar 1958 and Cort 2002: 41-42.
of seeing the institution as a relatively late aberration from what some consider a ‘pure’, ‘original’ Jainism that is not influenced by ‘Hinduism’, as many recent Jaina reformers and Western observers believed, we should see here the continuation of the transmission of ideas and practices that has a very long history.

Some interesting observations are made in Jhavery’s book about what seems a historical connection between Jaina knowledge about mantras and the Tīrthaṅkara Pārśva. The author refers to several passages in Jaina canonical texts where there is mention of the Pārśvāpatyas or followers of Pārśva as the followers of a form of Ārhata / Jaina religiosity that predates the reforms that were brought about by Mahāvīra in the sixth century BCE. In such passages those followers of the earlier religion are often treated with due respect, but sometimes are depicted as ‘lax’ because they do not follow Mahāvīra’s stricter monastic rules (for instance, they may reside in one and the same spot for as long as they wish), or – which is particularly interesting in our present context – they practice nimittas or the use of mantras to obtain things through magical means. Jhavery also mentions that the time in which Pārśva lived (traditionally accepted as 876-776 BCE or 875-775 BCE) “was the period when many of the later Mantras of Atharvaveda are supposed to have been composed.” In other words, in his view Pārśva lived at a time when there was an increased interest, not only among the (proto-) Jainas, but also among Vedic brahmins, in incantations and magical practices.

**How Padmāvati Came to Be**

The best known story in Karnataka about Padmāvati is found in the Mahāpurāṇa of Jinasena and Guṇabhadra, written in northern Karnataka in 9th century CE and arguably the single most influential religious text among the Jainas of southern India. The seventy-third parva of the purana deals with the bhāvāvali or succession of the last few lives of Pārśva before he attained liberation from rebirth. Here it is told that the learned brahmin couple Viśvabhūti and Anundari had two sons: Kamaṭha, whose character was like poison and sin, and Marubhūti, who was like nectar and dharma personified.

Both became ministers of the good king Aravinda. Because the evil Kamaṭha desired Marubhūti’s wife, he murdered

20 Jhavery 1944: 147-150.
21 Jhavery 1944: 151-152.
22 Jhavery 1944: 149.
24 Jhavery 1944: 149.
him, and thus began a series of rebirths in which the wicked brother consistently wronged the good one. 83,750 years after the attainment of liberation by the twenty-second Tīrthaṅkara Neminātha, the good brother was born as prince Pārśva in the Ugravaṃśa dynasty. The evil brother had been born as Pārśva’s maternal grandfather king Mahīpāla, who had lost his wife and out of grief performed a severely ascetic penance. One day, when Pārśva was sixteen years old, Mahīpāla felt disrespectfully treated by the youngster when Pārśva said he would lose everything if he would continue his ignorant tapas between five fires because he was killing living beings in the burning logs, which is as useless as striking bran to get rice, or churning water to get butter, and Pārśva warned him not out of arrogance but out of affection. Out of one of the logs fell two dying snakes, to which the future Tīrthaṅkara taught his insights before they died and took rebirth as Dharaṇendra and Padmāvati. The king died and became Śambara, a jyotiṣadeva. At the age of thirty, Pārśva became a monk; when he was about to lose his remaining ghnātikarma and attain mokṣa, Śambara in his jealous fury rained down disturbances and caused a storm in the hope of disturbing and ruining Pārśva’s progress, and he also threw a mountain at him. By means of his avadhijñāna or clairvoyant power, Dharaṇendra knew what was happening, and from the netherworld he and Padmāvati came and spread their hoods over Pārśva to shield him. This act of gratitude toward a merciful person on the part of basically cruel animals shows the power of mercy but was not needed for Pārśva to attain mokṣa, as the text says.

The association of the Tīrthaṅkara Pārśva and Dharaṇendra, the yakṣa and male counterpart of Padmāvati, is very old and deserves further investigation. Jhavery mentions Dharaṇendra, in

26 Mahāpurāṇa 73:92-95 (Shastry 1993: 456). The Ugravaṃśa is a rather mythical dynasty, “probably a branch of the non-Aryan Naga race of the Vrata Ḹāhātriya” (Jain 1977: 12). This is interesting in view of Pārśva’s association with the nāga couple Dharaṇendra and Padmāvati, and of the Sāntara dynasty (see below) claiming to belong to this Ugravaṃśa as well.

27 Pañcāgni: four fires and the sun overhead.


29 For avadhijñāna, a clairvoyant ability that arises when certain kind of karma has been lost, see Tattvārthasūtra 1:21-22.

30 Mahāpurāṇa 73:165-167 (Shastry 1993: 460). In other versions of this story, the protection by Dharaṇendra and Padmāvati was helpful for Pārśva to attain his spiritual goal, as the later Kannada poet Pārśvavamūḍita says in his Pārśvanāthapurāṇa: Kamaṭhāpasargamanaḍangisi Pārśvanāṭhana prabhūdhasiddhige nerāvād […] (quoted Nagarajaiah 1977: 183-184). Although the Mahāpurāṇa gives the doctrinally correct version (that the soul who is almost a Tīrthaṅkara is impervious to worldly disturbances), this later interpretation that the help by Dharaṇendra and Padmāvati was important for Pārśva to remain undisturbed and attain enlightenment is favoured in folklore. Unlike earlier authors, Pārśvavamūḍita describes Dharaṇendra and Padmāvati as a married couple (Nagarajaiah 1977: 179).
his words “the Indra of the serpent deities”, in the Āvaśyakacūrṇi, without an exact reference to the edition he used.31 Nagarajaiah points out that in several old texts, Dharaṇendra’s name is given as ‘Dharaṇa’ (Nagarajaiah 1976: 115) and also, astonishingly, as ‘Pārśva’.32 In other ancient texts, such as the Tattvārthasūtra, he is called ‘Dharaṇa’, and again other, Śvetāmbara, texts refer to him, somewhat confusingly, as ‘Pārśva’.33 We find the name ‘Pārśva’ also in the Bhairavapadmāvatikalpa.34 The name ‘Dharaṇa’ is also found in commentaries to Tattvārthasūtra 4:6, where there is mention of the pairs of ‘leaders’ (indra) of the various classes of gods; e.g., in the Sarvārthasiddhi of Pūjyapāda, where we read nāgakumārāṃ Dharāṇa Bhūtānanda of the nāgakumāras.35 ‘Dharaṇendra’ simply means ‘leader Dharaṇa’; but interestingly, Dharaṇa is here listed as leader of the nāgakumāras (as our story tells us, Dharaṇēṃdra and Padmāvati were reborn as nāgas), and two other names are mentioned as those of the leaders of the yaksas: yaksānāṃ Pūrṇabhadro Manibhadraṣa. Thus, Padmāvati’s consort has been present in Jainism for very long time already.

**Padmāvati and Hombuja**

Although Padmāvati worship is spread throughout Karnataka, and popular shrines dedicated to her are found in various locations, there is unanimity in recognizing one specific location as that of her main shrine: this is Humcha in central Karnataka, a small village that once was the capital of the very long-lived Sāṃtara dynasty, that ruled in what today is southwestern Karnataka.36 The town has had many names in the course of its long history, from Paṭṭepombuḷcanagara to Poṃbuḷca to Poṃbucca to Hombuja (the name which today is most used among the Jainas) to the modern Humcha.37 The village is dominated by the Jaina maṭha, which every year attracts thousands of devotees from literally all over the world who seek the blessings of Jaganmāte Śrī Padmāvatīdēvi.

31 Jhavery 1944: 175.
36 About the Sāṃtaras, see Nagarajaiah 1997.
37 In Hindi-language literature from northern India, I have also seen the name written as ‘Hummaca’.

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The main temple of Padmāvati in Hombuja was built in 1062 CE by Trailokyamallāvīra Sāṃtara, almost the same time when Malliṣenāsūri wrote his tantric work Bhairavapadmāvatīkalpa. But the temple in Hombuja was not the first in Karnataka: a stone inscription tells us that in approximately 490 CE Ravivarma (480-519), a ruler of the nebulous Kadamba dynasty, had a temple for Padmāvati constructed in the village of Kallēli in southwestern Karnataka. Several old Padmāvati temples have been taken over in the course of time by other religious communities. A satirical work in Kannada from the 12th century by the poet Brahmaśiva, titled Samay aparikṣe or ‘Investigation of religions’, mentions that the famous Mahālakṣmi Temple of Kolhapur once was dedicated to Padmāvati. It is also believed by persons in the Jaina community that the Śāradāmbā Temple at Śṛṅgēri, and the Rēṇuka Yellammadēvi Dēvasthāna at Saundatti, which now it is dedicated to Yellamma and is known as a centre of the notorious dēvadāsi practice (now claimed to have been eradicated), once were Padmāvati temples. Another case of such a takeover of a Padmāvati temple by brahmins in the town of Hanumakomḍa is documented in the Epigraphia Carnatica (IX.35.1117): “At present the Brahmanas

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38 This is probably the text about Padmāvati that is best known outside India, because it is included in Jhavery 1944.
of Anmakonda, who have somehow got possession of the temple, worship the goddess in it under the name Padmakshi, which they believe to be synonymous with Durga. It is not clear how or when the ownership of the temple passed from the Jainas to the Brahmanas.”

The second most popular narrative (second after the one in the Mahāpurāṇa about how Padmāvati became a yakṣi) that is told about Padmāvati in Karnataka explains how the goddess came to Hombuja:

The kingdom of Madhure in northern India is ruled by king Sakāra, whose only queen, Śrīyaladēvi, is from the other Madhure in southern India. By the grace of Padmāvati their son Jinadatta is born. Many years later, the king falls in love with the daughter of a savage tribal chieftain, marries her. The people of northern Madhure are so shocked about this that he must ask and receive the forgiveness of the Jaina monk Siddhāntakīrti. Sakāra also decides to abdicate in favour of his son Jinadatta. Under the influence of this second, savage wife, he cultivates base habits, such as eating meat. The second wife plots to kill Jinadatta, but the plot fails and her own son is killed instead. Jinadatta then flees southwards to his uncles in the other, southern Madhure and takes the mūrti of the goddess Padmāvati with him. But halfway south, in the middle of a forest, the goddess tells him not to go further. A group of tribal hunters accepts him as their king, and on the spot, they begin building the capital of a new kingdom. The goddess also gives Jinadatta advice on how to be a good ruler, and in order to finance the new kingdom, she says that if base metals are touched to her mūrti, these will be turned into gold. Jinadatta’s mother and the muni Siddhāntakīrti later join him in this new city of Poṃbucket. His mother insists that he should marry his two cousins from the southern Madhure. Years later, Jinadatta angers Padmāvati by an act of ingratitude (he receives the gift of two pearls from a fisherman, has two nose ornaments made of them and decides to give the bigger one to one his wives instead of offering it to Padmāvati), but she says that in this pañcamakāla, the age known in Jaina cosmology as duḥṣama, such weaknesses are common, and he is only a victim of circumstances. Yet her magical mūrti will disappear, and instead of this image a stone image of her will appear in the temple. After some time, Jinadatta abdicates in favour of his son; he becomes a monk, and both his wives become nuns.

The story of Jinadatta, as summarized above, is found in its most elaborate form in the long narrative poem Jinadattarāyacaritre

41 Quoted in Nagarajaiah 1997: 244.
(also called Padmāvatīmāhātmya) by the poet Padmanābhakavi, written in 1680 CE. Popular modern versions also exist, and the story has also inspired a number of folk songs. There are also lullabies that are sung in central Karnataka, in which the child that is sung to sleep is told to be like Jinadatta, who was protected by the goddess as long as he led a virtuous life.

Every year on the day Phālguṇa Kṛṣṇapāṣa Aṣṭami according to the Indian lunar almanac, the Mūlā Nakṣatra day, the Mahārathōtsava or Great Car Festival in honour of Padmāvati takes place in Hombuja. This is usually in the month of March or April. This is followed by a mahābhiseka with 108 kalaśas for Pārśvanātha on the following day. This annual temple festival lasts for 9 days altogether. Approximately 18,000 to 20,000 people come to Hombuja on this occasion, mainly from the surrounding area, but also from other parts of Karnataka, other parts of India as far as Manipur, and from places such as New Zealand and the USA. On the final evening of the car festival, many people crowd around the decorated mānastambha in front of the Padmāvati temple. In the general manner of Indian car festivals, the presence of the goddess has been transferred from her main mūrti or image in the temple to her portable utsavamūrti or processional image, which has been carried to and placed in the temple ratha or ‘car’ and pulled in procession through the village.

42 Bhatta 2003.
44 A ‘Pride Pillar’ is a tall pillar in front of traditional Jaina temples, which is a particular feature of Jaina architecture. See Wiley 2009: 137-138. It is believed that the sight of a mānastambha creates a feeling of awe and humility in the believer; see Shama Rao and Nagarajaiah 1981: 205-206. “Idara darśanadhīṃ nāōdīdavāna ahāmkāra dūravāgi dhārmika śraddhe mūḍuttade” (“By seeing it, the self-importance of the seer wanes and religious faith arises”, p. 206).
After the *ratha* with the goddess returns to the temple in the evening, the main priest takes the *utsavamūrti* from the *ratha* and proceeds to the *mānastambha*. A traditional eightfold veneration of the goddess follows, consisting of eight double circumambulations of the *mānastambha* during which eight musical performances (vocal and instrumental, on drums, *nāgasvara*, saxophone a.o.) are offered to the goddess.
The performers circumambulate walking backwards, facing the goddess who, carried by the main priest, follows. After the eighth offering, it is time for the goddess to return to the temple. Against a background of loud music by all the musicians, the priest begins to tremble in a trance; he tries to enter the temple but is not in full control of his movements.
Priest in trance carrying the image of Padmāvati

After several attempts, he succeeds in entering the temple and rushing through the main hall to the entrance of the garbhagrha or inner sanctum, where other priests take the utsavamūrti from him and he is dragged off through the side exit of the temple where he is fanned and resuscitated.
Padmāvatī reenters the main hall of her temple

Behind the curtain of the garbhagrha the other priests ritually transfer the presence of the goddess from the utsavamūrti back to the main mūrti, then the curtain is opened again and under the ringing of all the bells of the temple a magnificent ārati (ritual offering of lights in the form of oil lamps) is performed.
Most of the people who attend are not Jains but followers of other religions, from Hombuja and the neighbouring area. It is clear that for them it is not Pārśvanāthasvāmi, but his attendant yakṣi Padmāvati who is the central personality of the nine-day celebrations.

**Padmāvati in Other Localities**

Some folk stories show quite different and puzzling sides of the goddess’ personality, as in a folktale that once was told to me in Shravanabelagola and is also recorded in S.P. Padmaprasad’s study.
of Jaina folk literature: the story of ‘Padmāvati of the cave’, which goes as follows:

A young shepherd is herding his sheep one day near a hillock at Shravanabelagola, and one of the sheep runs off through a crevice in the side of the hillock. The shepherd creeps in after the sheep into a cave and grabs it by its tail, but the sheep insists to pull the shepherd further into the cave.

Passing through nine doorways, the sheep and shepherd finally reach a large room where he sees the goddess seated on a golden swing that hangs from silver chains. He is gripped with fear. The goddess tells him not to be afraid, because she will show him the way out, but on the condition that he will tell nobody that she is there; if he does tell anyone, she says, then his head will burst. She also gives him three stones, which at home he must place in his three containers for rāgi, rice, and money, and if he does a simple pūje for these three stones every day with an incense stick, he will become a wealthy man. So it happens. People wonder where all his wealth comes from, and they put him under extreme pressure to tell them, but he pretends not to know. His wife, however, does not give up. He tells her that his head will burst if he tells her, but still she insists; he relents, tells her, and promptly his head bursts and he dies.
It is said that still today, if one listens carefully, one can hear the sound of Padmāvati’s swing through the crevice in the rock. A small manṭapa structure marks the hill in Shravanabelagola where Padmāvati’s cave is said to be located.

We also find Padmāvati’s presence where Pārśva plays little or no role at all, for instance, in the majestic Bhaṇḍāribasadi in Shravanabelagola.

Also in Dharmasthala, another important, multireligious place of pilgrimage, in southwestern Karnataka, on a hillock at the edge of the town there stands an old but recently radically renovated basadi or temple dedicated to the Tīrthaṅkara Candranātha. Architecturally

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it is clear who is the main focus of the temple; however, typically, there is an auxiliary shrine within the garbhagṛha with a much smaller mūrti that does not look in the same direction as the mūrti of Candranātha but in a 90-degree angle; visitors can have darśana of this mūrti through a side entrance of the temple.
I once witnessed a large festival where the Jaina populace decided it was appropriate to also purify this *basadi*. Part of the rituals of purification was the carrying of the *utsavamūrti* of Padmāvati by a priest in a state of possession, similar to what can be seen in Hombuja.
Padmāvati’s Position within Jainism

Padmāvati is, so to say, a somewhat independent deity in her own right. The reasons for her popularity become clear when one learns for what reasons she is propitiated, namely, a large variety of matters concerning well-being in the world. For instance, the late Padmanabha Jaini of the University of California at Berkeley, who was the leading academic authority on Jainism in North America, told me long ago that his mother had named him after the poet because, like Jinadatta, he was a boon from the goddess at Hombuja. Several inscriptions testify that various ruling families in the Kannada-speaking region of India considered themselves to be ‘Padmāvatīdēvī-labdhavara-prasādaru’ or ‘blessed by the boons that were granted by Padmāvatīdēvī’.

Many earlier authors on the subject of yakṣa worship have spent much time and effort discussing questions of the origins of the

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46 Padmanabha N. Jaini’s mother had earned a reputation for herself as an author of devotional Jaina literature in Kannada under the pen-name Nellikāru Jaina Mahile, ‘the Jaina lady from Nellikāru’, a village not far from Karkala.
47 Nagarajaiah 1997: 243-244 provides several examples from the volumes of the collected Karnataka inscriptions Epigraphia Carnatica.
practice, and usually they were eager to assert that *yakṣa* worship in Jainism is a ‘mere’ borrowing from ‘Hinduism’. One very popular assumption among modern scholars is that the practice arose in response to the rise of *bhakti* religiosity in varieties of Vaishnava or Śaivite Hinduism, to serve the emotional needs of the common people. – But there are a few problems in this assumption. First of all, there is the historical difficulty that the earliest traces of *yakṣa* worship in Jainism are clearly older than the upsurge of popular forms of devotional Hinduism that started from Tamilnadu around 600 CE. Secondly, if it is objected that the place and function of *yakṣi* worship in Jainism do not fit in with the Jaina atheistic worldview with its emphasis on ethics and renunciation, and therefore *yakṣa* worship must be ‘Hindu’ in origin, then one is using a very vague concept of ‘Hinduism’ indeed. On the other hand, an entire chapter of the Tattvārthasūtra (written approx. 200 CE) is devoted to various types of divine beings, all of which (also the *yakṣas* and *yakṣis*) are subject to the laws of karma like any other living beings.48

Rather than wondering which doctrinally codified religion borrowed what from which other one, I believe another question is far more interesting and important: why should anything be ‘borrowed’ at all? What is the meaning of a story like the one of Padmāvatī in the cave? What is the point of integrating the worship of a goddess like Padmāvatī in a religion like Jainism, in which its foremost religiously exemplary personalities are world renouncers who seek to free the essence of their being from the travails of common life in *saṃsāra*? I believe this question itself already provides at least half of the answer. Fact is that we experience the travails of *saṃsāra*, and as long as we have not attained *mokṣa* or liberation from *saṃsāra*, we must find ways of dealing with those travails. Indian religious and philosophical thought in general has throughout its long history had an open attitude toward phenomena which in the West we may call ‘parapsychological’, ‘paranormal’ or ‘occult.’ Ways of ‘paranormal’ cognition have been recognized as valid means of knowledge in systems of Indian philosophy: e.g., in Jainism as *avadhiññāna*, *mahāparyāyajñāna* and *kevalajñāna*, or as *yogipratyakṣa* in Vaishnava thought. The stories about Padmāvatī seem to be reports of contacts with a not entirely mundane realm, or a para-mundane realm of experience which cannot be expressed in mundane terms, but in symbolic ones. The mention of *yakṣas* in the Jaina āgamas, and the relatively far more elaborate treatment of them and similar beings in the Tattvārthasūtra, are evidence that

48 It is worth mentioning that in the story of how the woman Kāṃcanaṃāle became the yakṣi Jvālāmālinī, Kāṃcanaṃāle meets a goddess, who tells her what she must do (among other things, regularly worship Padmāvatī) in order to influence her accumulated karma in such a way that she can become a yakṣi. See Zydenbos 1991: 104, Zydenbos 2000: 171-172.
from early times onwards, Jaina thinkers have recognized and not summarily dismissed such experiences.

The apparent similarities between goddesses in different Indic religious traditions have often led to questions like ‘is Padmāvati actually nothing but a Jainified version of the Hindu Manasā or Kālī?’ Also parallels between Padmāvati and the Buddhist deity Tārā have been noted.\(^{49}\) I believe that such questions are not appropriate, and that we are dealing with a symbolic metalinguage by which people within the Jaina tradition try to come to terms with certain experiences of phenomena that are shared with persons outside the Jaina tradition, hence there is also a shared symbolism. Therefore Padmāvati (or Sarasvati, or any of the other so-called ‘lower deities’) is not ‘borrowed from Hinduism’, nor vice versa, but belongs to an ancient realm of experience that is pre-philosophical, pre-doctrinal, and has a degree of universality that is recognized across Indian denominational boundaries. For this reason, there is nothing reprehensible about Hindus of whatever kind coming to Hombuja (and to other Jaina kṣētras) to seek the blessings of the goddess. On the contrary: it is considered perfectly natural.

To academically understand yakṣi worship, we must of course rely on philology and fieldwork, but also on disciplines such as cognitive science and depth psychology to understand the obvious inter-religious symbolism that permeates yakṣi worship, which till today has not yet been sufficiently done. As I have mentioned elsewhere,\(^{50}\) Padmāvati, Jvālāmālini and Kūśmāṃdini, the three most popular Jaina goddesses in Karnataka, have distinct personalities: the stories about Jvalāmālini tend to involve ferociousness, straightforwardness, and singlemindedness; the stories about Kūśmāṃdini show her as a strong, motherly protectress; the stories about Padmāvati tend to be magical, not straightforward, with an unexpected twist. It cannot be without reason that in popular worship the male yakṣas are not nearly so prominent as the female yakṣis: the goddesses are a counterpart to the male Tīrthaṅkaras, who stand for liberation from samsāra and from all that is worldly, rather than for engagement with it.\(^{51}\) A similar male-female polar symbolism is in place here as in, for instance, the ancient Śaṅkhya school of Hindu philosophy, where innumerable souls or monads of consciousness (puruṣas, that are symbolically considered ‘male’) are considered to be fundamentally distinct from unconscious nature (prakṛti, that is considered ‘female’) and the eschatological goal is that the puruṣas are liberated

\(^{49}\) Jhavery 1944: 295.
\(^{50}\) Zydenbos 2000: 166ff.
\(^{51}\) Zydenbos 1993: 25.
from *prakṛti*. Another parallel are the Hindu tantric/āgamic divine couples Lakṣmī-Viṣṇu and Śakti-Śiva.

Rather than dismiss the phenomenon of goddess worship in Jainism as an aberration, as a deviation from what some consider ‘true’ Jainism, we should accept the historical fact that the worship of such divinities has been present in Jaina culture since its historical beginnings. While the search for origins (whether in time, in space, or in a particular narrowly defined cultural setting) may be interesting in itself, I am very skeptical about how solid the evidence can be for finding a supposed one and only source of such phenomena. It seems rather that we have here a reservoir of religious concepts, terms, and ritual practices which predates all the three main classical Indian religious traditions, Jaina, Buddhist, Hindu, and from which all three took whatever seemed to be meaningful and useful and integrated this in their own systems of thought in sensible ways. Even within one religion differences can be found, as can be seen in Digambara and Śvetāmbara depictions of Padmāvati.\(^5^2\) To paraphrase C.G. Jung: “real is what works”, and the shared concepts and practices were evidently regarded as effective. A comparative phenomenological study of parallel forms of goddess worship in different Indian religious traditions could help us understand more about just what works, and how.

Photos taken by author.

\(^{52}\) Cf. Nagarajaiah’s comparison of the naming and iconography of Digambara and Śvetāmbara yakṣas and yakṣis in his detailed study *Yakṣa-yakṣiyaru* (Nagarajaiah 1976).
Primary literature


Secondary literature


