

Exploring the Art of Raṅgāvali in Jaina Literature and Culture

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Raṅgāvali, the term derived from Sanskrit words - *raṅga* (color) and *āvali* (row) is an ancient Indian folk art created on the floor. This ephemeral floor art is a manifestation of the beliefs and customs of the groups of population in different parts of the country.

In India, the Jainas like the Hindus have a very ancient tradition of making *raṅgāvali*. Unlike the Hindus and the Parsis, the Jainas do not follow the custom of making *raṅgāvali* on the threshold of the house everyday but they draw it in the temples or in places of worship or where some religious ritual is performed. This practice is followed mainly by the *Mūrti-pūjaka* Jaina sects all over India.

The Jaina literary sources highlight the existence of this art since very ancient times. The oldest reference to the word *raṅgāvali* comes from the Jaina literature *Paūma-Cariū* of Vimalasūri (1st to 3rd century CE). This seems to be the earliest Jaina text furnishing important evidence to *raṅgāvali* in worship of the *Caitya*.¹

एतो च्विय आसाढे, राया धवलढुमीएँ भूईए ।
जिणचेइयाण महिमं, काऊण तओ समाढत्तो ॥
सम्मज्जिओवलित्ता, जिणहरभूमी करन्ति केएत्थ ।
रग्ढवलीनिओगं, चुण्णेणं पंचवण्णेणं ॥
विरयन्ति य भत्तीओ, विचित्तधाऊरसेणं तु ॥

This means – On the eighth day of the bright half of the *Āṣāḍha*, the king begins the worship of *Jina Caitya* with great pomp. The floor of the *Caitya* was cleansed and washed and was duly decorated with *raṅgāvali* in five coloured-powders. Several others made paintings with unique *dhātūrasa* (some sort of liquid colours).

*Paūma-Cariū*² also refers to *raṅgāvali* in five coloured-powders to welcome Rāma at Rāmagiri – रग्ढवली विरइया, दसद्धवण्णेण चुण्णेणं ।

Varāṅga-Carita, a 7th century CE Sanskrit text by Jaṭāsimhanandi, in its 23rd *sarga* describes the installation of Jina image in *caitya-gr̥ha* (.....*pratimā Jinasya samsthāpīte caitya-gr̥he*..... verse 2) wherein on the occasion of *rātrabali* (night oblations), numerous shapes (*nānākṛtim*..... verse 8) were drawn on the ground by experts with the help of powders, flowers, rice-grains in five colours and all these powders, etc. were worth offering (to Jina)³ :

चूर्णैश्च पुष्पैरपि तण्डुलैश्च दशार्धवर्णैर्बलिकर्मयोग्यैः ।
नानाकृतीस्तत्र बलीन्विधिज्ञा भूमिप्रदेशे रचयांबभूवुः ॥

Thus, *Varāṅga-Carita* refers to the drawing of *raṅgāvali* although without mentioning the name. The second significant thing appearing in this context is the use of *raṅgāvalis* as offerings. Besides this, the execution of *raṅgāvali* by a person who was well versed in the art of oblations (*balinvidhijñā*) highlights the fact that it was a significant ritual to be followed only by the initiated.

Digambara Jaina scholar, Somadevasūri's work *Yaśastilaka Campū* (959 CE) has got several references to *raṅgāvali*. Besides mentioning about devising the ground for *raṅgāvali*, it also refers to *raṅgāvali* made of flowers and *karpūra* (camphor) powder in the court hall and *raṅgāvali* design made using colour stones in the queen's apartment.

पर्यन्तपापैः संपादितकुसुमोपहारः प्रदत्तरग्डवलिः इव गुहापरिसरेषु⁴
अकालक्षेपं दक्षस्व रग्डवलिप्रदानेषु⁵
अनल्पकर्पूरपरागपरिकल्पितरग्डवलिविधानम्⁶
रग्डवलीषु परभागकल्पनम्⁷
चरणनखस्फुटितेन रग्डावलीमणीन् इव असहमान्य⁸

A commentary on *Yaśastilaka Campū* by Śrutasāgarasūri explains the *raṅgāvali-vidhāna* as *catuṣka-pūranā*⁹ (*catuṣka-pūranā* may also be translated as *cauka-pūranā*. *Raṅgāvali* is known as *cauka-pūranā* in Uttar Pradesh).

Hemachandra Sūri in his *Deśināmamālā* (1088-1172 CE) uses the term *āipana* (*raṅgāvali* is known as *āipana* in Himachal Pradesh) derived from the Sanskrit word *ālimpana* and explains the term as to beautify the house with rice-paste.

आइप्पणं पिष्टं उत्सवे गृहमण्डनार्थं सुधाछटा च ।¹⁰
तन्दुलपिष्टक्षीरं गृहमण्डनम् आइप्पणं इति अन्ये ।¹¹

The use of *raṅgāvali* in *Jina* worship by households has been pointed out by Arhaddāsa in *Muni-Suvrata-Kāvya* (mid 13th Century CE):

प्रत्यङ्गणं कल्पितपंचरत्नरंगालयश्चक्रुरनेकभंगाः ।
जिनेन्द्रजन्मावसरप्रणश्यत्ययोधरस्त्रस्त धनुर्विशंकां ॥¹²

This means – “In every (home), courtyards were decorated with *Raṅgālaya* in five jewel (like) colours and in variegated designs, which (caused) the illusion of a rainbow (that had come down from) the clouds to celebrate the nativity of *Jinendra*”.

There are numerous other references in Jaina religious literature and writings of early Jaina *Munis* and scholars which speak of *raṅgāvali*.

The early Jaina text refers to the purpose and medium of drawing the *raṅgāvali*, but does not mention the figures or symbols drawn. However, the study of the sculptures in ancient Jaina architecture, the miniature paintings on the Jaina texts, different *paṭas* and scroll paintings of the *Vijñyaptipatras* and the *Kṣamāpanāpatras* and also the *raṅgāvalis* drawn currently throw some light on this aspect.

***Raṅgāvali* in Early Jaina Art:**

In early Indian art, it is not uncommon to find wooden architectural styles transformed into stone. The stone railings at Sanchi, Sarnath, Bharhut, etc. and the beams carved out in rock-caves devoid of any functional utility are good examples of it. It should not be illogical then to look for *raṅgāvalis* transformed in permanent medium in early Indian art.

With respect to early Jaina art, a good example that can be cited is the Jaina *stūpa* at Kaṅkālī Ṭilā in Mathura. Literary and epigraphical sources point to the existence of this *stūpa* as early as 3rd century BCE. Early excavations on the site have revealed the successive elaborations of the *stūpa*. From this Jaina *stūpa* area a number of *āyāgapaṭas* (tablets of homage) have been excavated and explored. The *āyāgapaṭas* labelled in Śaka-Kuṣāṇa script, were put up by the devotees for the worship of *arhatas*. From the sculptural depictions, it is evident that they were fixed around the *stūpa* on the vertical face of its basal platform. The presence of symbols like the *Aṣṭa-maṅgalas* on these *paṭas* is noteworthy (Fig.1).



Fig.1. *Āyāgapaṭa* of Sihanādika, Mathura

V.S. Agrawala identified these *paṭas* with *pupphadhana* or *puṣpagṛhaṇī vedikā*, i.e. 'flower offering platforms'.¹³ He further observes – “The strong belief in the significance of symbols and powerful influence which the symbols exercised on religious worship are made manifest on these *āyāgapaṭas* as nowhere else. They belong to a transitional period when symbols were as much meaningful as the Tīrthaṅkara image and the two were equally balanced in harmony with each other.”¹⁴

The pertinent question about these *paṭas* is their prototype or source inspiration. It is quite unlikely that the bulk of the symbols used in these early arts were in the minds of the people, waiting to be carved in stone. Hence, it is very likely that during the preceding period the practice was of drawing these symbols in temporary media. The literary evidences support this suggestion. The practice of *raṅgāvali* as mentioned in the literary sources highlights the fact that it was a well established ritual then. The literary sources do not necessarily derive from or depict the contemporary practices. Rather they draw from earlier existing traditions.

It is already seen that *raṅgāvali* was made in Jina *Caityas* and objects worth offering to the Jina were decreed to be painted in *raṅgāvali*. *Rāmagiri Upākhyāna* of *Pauma-cariu* informs us of the construction of Jina *Caitya* on the very same site where the *raṅgāvali* was drawn to welcome Rāma. Daśaratha and Rāma in this text are Jina worshippers. The Jainas in this early period, as today, used *raṅgāvali* as a worshipping symbol. The *āyāgapaṭa* has the same function. Besides the auspicious symbols and a Tīrthaṅkara image (or a symbol to represent him) in the centre, two pillars are shown on either side of the *paṭas*, suggesting an architectural complex.

Considering the symbols and functions of the *āyāgapaṭas* and their similarity with those of *raṅgāvalis*, one can assume that the latter served as model for the former.

Current Practice:

It is noteworthy that the same ancient practice, with hardly any change, is followed by the members of the Jaina community even today. Various symbolic drawings are made everyday by the ladies as part of the worship called *Caitī-vandana* (*Caitī* here means *Caitya*). These drawings are called *Gahūṅli*. It is made with uncooked rice on a wooden low stool or *pāṭlā* in front of the Jina image. Rice does not sprout and hence used for making the *Gahūṅli*.¹⁵ Offerings like *miṭhāi* or sugar, fruits or dry-fruits and coins are placed on these *Gahūṅlis*.

The *Gahūnli* symbols consist mainly of the *Svastika* combined with other symbols or variations of *Svastika*, like the *Nandyāvarta* (Fig.2). The *Nandyāvarta* is an elaborate and extended form of *Svastika*. The *Gahūnli* is made with continuous chanting of prayers. The significant part is that at the end of the ritual the diagram is ritually dispersed and the rice grains are collected and placed in a box. The act of creating the *Gahūnli* itself is important and it is never meant to last.



Fig.2. Aṣṭa-maṅgala, Artist Jitendra Vaishnavi

Most common symbol of the Jainas is the *Svastika* with three dots on the top surmounted by a half moon with a dot. In this diagram, the four arms of the *Svastika* stands as a reminder that during the cycles of birth and death we may be born into any one of the four destinies: *Deva* (heavenly beings), *Manuṣya* (human beings), *Tiryac* (animal beings including birds, bugs, and plants) and *Narakī* (hellish beings) and that human beings should aim for liberation and not the rebirth. The three dots above the *Svastika* represent the three jewels of Jainism: *Samyak Darśana* (Right Faith), *Samyak Jñāna* (Right Knowledge) and *Samyak Caritra* (Right Conduct), which enable a man to attain *Mokṣa*. The half moon or the curved arc represents the abode of the *Siddhas*. It is known as the *Siddhaśilā*. It is the final resting place of the liberated souls. The dot above represents a *Siddha*.

In case of the occurrence of death of any Jaina Guru, a left-handed *Svastika*, which is not considered very auspicious, is drawn.

The *Aṣṭa-maṅgala* or the eight auspicious symbols are drawn on special occasions in the Jaina temples. These symbols are familiar to both the Jaina sects, i.e. *Digambara* and *Śvetāmbara* and form a part of the Jaina worship from ancient times. They are – the *Svastika*, *Śrīvatsa*, *Nandyāvarta*, *Vardhamānaka* (powder flask), *Bhadrāsana* (throne, a particular type of seat), *Kalaśa* (the full-vase), *Darpaṇa*

(mirror) and *Matsyayūgma* (pair of fish). As discussed above, the earliest surviving depiction of these symbols is in the *āyāgapaṭas* of Mathura. It also finds mention in some of the *Aṅga* texts, like the *Aupapātika Sūtra*, which mentions that the *Aṣṭa-maṅgala* are to be shown on the Aśoka tree.¹⁶

In the later period, these symbols are seen depicted in the miniature paintings of the *Kalpasūtra* text, the paintings on canvas of different *paṭas* and scroll paintings of the *Vijñyaptipatras* and the *Kṣamāpanāpatras*. According to the scriptures every Jaina has to draw them with pure un-broken rice-grains before the icon of the Tīrthaṅkara.

These symbols are sometimes seen before the Tīrthaṅkara image and on different parts of a temple, especially on architraves or door lintels. These are also painted on walls and carved on the *bali-paṭas* or offering stands. Such stools, often made of wood with silver plate studded all over it, or of silver or brass, and with reliefs of the eight auspicious marks are even today used for placing offerings in Jaina shrines and the Jaina ladies often prepare the *Aṣṭa-maṅgala* with uncooked rice on such platters. Other popular *raṅgāvali* in the form of *yantra*, drawn on auspicious occasions is the *Siddha-cakra* made in the traditional five colour grains. Various offerings to the deity are placed on this *yantra*. The *Siddha-cakra* is in the shape of eight-petal lotus, enclosed in a *kalaśa* form, which is attributed in anthropomorphic analogy with a pair of eyes.

Besides this, few other *yantras* like the Pārśvanātha Bhagwān *yantra* (Fig.3) in the form of six-pointed star – also enclosed in a *kalaśa* form, the *Padmāvati Devī yantra*, the *Rṣi-maṅḍala* representing the 24 Tīrthaṅkaras and so on are made. It is important to use the colour and the *bīja-akṣara* associated with the respective deity in these *yantras*.



Fig.3. Pārśvanātha Bhagwān Yantra

At the time of *Bhaktāmara pūjana*, a *Rāyan-ṛkṣa* (Fig.4) is drawn below which the foot-prints of Ādeśvara *Bhagwān* are shown, thus, representing the Tīrthaṅkara meditating under the *Rāyan-ṛkṣa*.

The drawing of these *raṅgāvalis* is commissioned work done by Jaina artists who are not only good at their art but also have knowledge about the correct depiction of the *yantra* with appropriate symbols and colours. This reminds us of the execution of *raṅgāvali* by a person who is well versed in the art of oblations (*balinvidhijña*) as mentioned in the literary sources.



Fig.4. *Rāyan-ṛkṣa* with the foot-prints of Ādeśvara *Bhagwān*.

One interesting fact is that the making of symbols and the *yantras* is always referred to as writing and not drawing. This throws light on its hieroglyphic nature. In the olden days the symbols must have been employed for picture-writing.

Other depictions commonly drawn in *raṅgāvali* are the *Pañca-kalyāṇaka* or the five major events associated with a Tīrthaṅkara, viz: the *Garbha* (conception), *Janma* (birth), *Tapa* (austerities), *Jñāna* (omniscience) and *Mokṣa* (liberation). These events are depicted even today at the time of the installation of the Tīrthaṅkara *pratimā*. This ceremony is also known as *Añjana-śalākā*. Among the *Pañca-kalyāṇakas*, the first event of the conception, depicting the 14 dreams of the mothers of the Tīrthaṅkaras is particularly popular. *Kalpasūtra* paintings show representations of these dreams either in groups or singly. These are also represented in stone reliefs in some Jaina shrines like the Kumbharia shrine in Gujarat.

A more recent trend in the practice of *raṅgāvali* is the making of 3-dimensional images of the deities, sometimes depicting important events of their lives. These are displayed with complete light and sound effect and are meant to be seen with Anaglyph glasses.

Besides these modern trends, another ritual of great antiquity is seen as followed by the Digambara Jainas, mainly of Karnataka state. They make ritualistic diagrams out of groups of unbroken rice grains. The diagrams are

referred to as 'Akṣatā-puñja', where *Akṣatā* stands for rice grains and *puñja* for group of rice grains. Number of grains in a *puñja* should be same, which is usually 4 or 5. Number of *puñjas* in the diagram corresponds to a significant symbol in Jaina religion. Thus,

1 *puñja* represents *Kevalajñāna*

3 *puñjas* in a straight line represent *Ratnatraya* (*Samyak – Darśana, Jñāna, Caritra*)

4 *puñjas* in a straight line represent *Anuyoga*

5 *puñjas* in a straight line represent *Pañca-kalyāṇa*

5 *puñjas* (1 in the centre and 4 in the four directions) represent *Pañca Parmeṣṭhī*

9 *puñjas* represent *Nava-devatā*

108 *puñjas* for *Japa mantras*

24 *puñjas* for *Tīrthaṅkaras* and so on.

Bhaktāmāra Stotra yantra, Merū parvata, Catāri Maṅgalam, Siddha-cakra, Kāla-cakra, Kevalya Bhagwān are some of the *Akṣatā-puñja* diagrams commonly drawn.

The above discussion beginning with the earliest evidences of *raṅgāvali* in Jaina literature and its symbolism found in early Jaina art and the later miniature paintings and ending with the study of the current practices with respect to the art of *raṅgāvali*, leads to the conclusion that the art was and will always remain a significant part of the Jaina religious life.

References

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4. Pt. Shivadatta (Ed.), *Yaśastilaka-Campū*, Part I, Nirnaya Sagar Press, Bombay, 1916, p.133.
5. *Ibid.*, p.350.
6. *Ibid.*, p.369.
7. *Ibid.*, Part II, p.247).
8. V. Raghavan, "Gleanings from Somadevasūri's Yaśastilaka-Campū ", R.D. Ranade, A. Siddiqi & U. Mishra (Ed.), *Journal of Ganganath Jha Research Institute*, Vol.I, Part-2, Ganganath Jha Research Institute, Allahabad, 1944, p.256.

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11. *Ibid.*, glossary, p.7.
12. Pt. K. Bhujabali Sastri & Pt. Haranath Dvivedi (Ed.), *Munisūvrata-Kāvya by Arhaddāsa*, Jain Siddhant Bhavan, Ara, 1929, verse 23 of canto IV, p.80.
13. V.S. Agrawala, *Indian Art*, Ist edition, Prithvi Prakashan, Varanasi, 1965, p.231.
14. *Ibid.*, p.232.
15. The white rice grain is non-fertile by nature as one cannot grow rice plants by seeding. Thus, as per Jaina philosophy, rice grain symbolizes the last birth. It is thus believed that by performing *pūjā* with rice grains one strives to put all the efforts in this life in such a way that this life becomes one's last life and after the end of this life one will be liberated and will not be reborn again.
16. A.K. Bhattacharya, *Historical Development of Jaina Iconography*, Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2010, p.20.