
Ancient Jain Literature in Karnataka

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ABSTRACT:

Ancient Jain literature in Karnataka stands as a cornerstone in shaping the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual heritage of the region. Flourishing especially between 400 and 1200 AD, this golden era—celebrated as the Augustan Age of Kannada literature—was profoundly enriched by the contributions of eminent Digambara Jain poets, monks, and scholars. Their works, composed in Kannada, Sanskrit, and Prakrit, laid the foundation for classical Kannada prose and poetry, while also influencing moral thought, religious philosophy, historiography, and narrative traditions. This vibrant literary legacy not only elevated Kannada to a sophisticated literary medium but also played a pivotal role in nurturing Karnataka's early cultural identity.

KEYWORDS:

Jain Monks, Jain literature, Three Gems, Champu, Craftsmanship.

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Introduction:

Karnataka forms a distinguished literary tradition that stands as a cornerstone in the evolution of the Kannada language. Shaped by the profound wisdom and intellectual pursuits of Jain monks, poets, and scholars, this tradition blossomed into a remarkable literary movement. The illustrious “Three Gems”—Pampa, Ponna, and Ranna brought unparalleled glory to Kannada Jain literature. Later, eminent writers such as Chavundaraya, Nemichandra, Janna Nagachandra, and Shivakotyacharya enriched this legacy with their masterful works.

From as early as the 4th century CE, Jain literature infused Kannada with cultural depth and linguistic refinement, transforming it into a mature and vibrant literary medium. Rooted in the Digambara Jain tradition, its profound philosophical insights, ethical values, and historical–mythological narratives elevated Kannada literature to new heights. Far beyond religious texts, the works of Jain scholars serve as invaluable sources that mirror Karnataka’s cultural growth, societal ethos, and linguistic sophistication.

Jain Literatures in Karnataka**Adikavi Pampa:**

Adikavi Pampa (10th Century) celebrated as the first great poet of Kannada literature, stands as a monumental figure whose works laid the very foundation of classical Kannada writing. Composing during the 10th century, Pampa revolutionized Kannada literature through his masterpieces *Vikramarjuna Vijaya* (also known as *Pampa Bharata*, a Jain retelling of the *Mahabharata*) and *Adipurana*, both crafted in the elegant *champu* style—a harmonious blend of prose and verse. Written around 939 CE, these works set a literary benchmark that shaped the trajectory of Kannada literature for generations, earning him the revered title “Father of Kannada Literature.”

1. Vikramarjuna Vijaya (Pampa Bharata):

A brilliant re-envisioning of the *Mahabharata*, this epic narrates the story from Arjuna’s perspective, skilfully linking the hero with Pampa’s royal patron, King Arikesari II, thereby blending myth, history, and devotion with poetic finesse.

2. Adipurana:

This spiritually profound work recounts the life of the first Jain

Tirthankara, Rishabhanatha, and highlights the moral and spiritual journeys of his sons, Bharata and Bahubali, emphasizing themes of renunciation, enlightenment, and inner victory.

Ponna (10th Century)

Ponna, one of the illustrious “Three Gems” (Ratnatraya) of Kannada literature, occupies a distinguished place in the cultural history of Karnataka. A gifted 10th-century Jain poet and the esteemed court poet of the Rashtrakuta emperor Krishna III, Ponna played a pivotal role in shaping the early classical period of Kannada literature. His works beautifully blend Sanskrit literary elegance, Jain philosophical depth, and Kannada poetic artistry, laying the foundation for the rich tradition of Jain epics in the language. Through his masterful storytelling and ethical vision, Ponna elevated Kannada to new heights of refinement and spiritual expression.

Shantipurana: Ponna’s most celebrated masterpiece, this champu epic narrates the many lives of the 16th Tirthankara, Shantinatha. Rich in Jain theology, moral reflection, and poetic grace, it stands as one of the finest examples of classical Kannada literature.

Jinaksharamale: A brilliant acrostic composition, this work praises revered Jain saints through intricately structured verses arranged according to Kannada alphabetical patterns, demonstrating Ponna’s profound devotion and technical mastery.

Bhuvanaika Ramabhyudaya: Though now lost, this early Jain adaptation of the Ramayana profoundly influenced later Kannada retellings. It is remembered for expanding the scope of Kannada narrative literature and for reinforcing the Jain literary tradition within the epic genre.

Ranna (10th Century)

Ranna, the celebrated “Kavichakravarti” (Emperor of Poets), stands as one of the towering pillars of early Kannada literature. As the youngest of the illustrious Three Gems, he enriched Jain’s literary tradition with his powerful epics, heroic narratives, and linguistic mastery. Writing under the patronage of the Western Chalukyas, Ranna skilfully blended religious devotion, courtly grandeur, and epic imagination, leaving an indelible mark on Kannada’s classical heritage. His works combine vigorous storytelling with moral depth, making him one of the most influential poets of medieval Karnataka.

Ajitha Tirthankara Purana (993 CE): A profound religious epic recounting the life of Ajitanatha, The second Jain Tirthankara. Influenced by Gunabhadra's Uttarapurana, the work elegantly praises Ranna's distinguished patroness Attimabbe, celebrating her devotion and generosity. The second Tirthankara of the current Avasarpini cycle. Rooted deeply in Jain religious tradition, this Purana highlights the ideals of non-violence, renunciation, spiritual purity, and the path to liberation. Composed by eminent Jain scholars, it stands as a valuable contribution to Jain devotional literature and medieval Indian narrative tradition.

Gadayuddha (Sahasabheema Vijaya): Ranna's undisputed masterpiece, this epic centres on the iconic mace duel between Bhima and Duryodhana. Filled with vira rasa (heroic sentiment), the poem boldly parallels Bhima's valour with that of Ranna's patron, King Satyashraya, creating a vibrant fusion of mythology and royal tribute. Gadayudha remains a shining jewel of Kannada literature, blending emotion, ethics, and epic grandeur into a single unforgettable narrative.

Rannakanda: An early and remarkable Kannada dictionary, it is unique for defining vocabulary through kandapadya verses, showcasing Ranna's linguistic precision and poetic creativity.

Parashurama Charita & Chakreshvara Charita: Though some of these works are partially lost, they are known for glorifying notable patrons, such as Chamundaraya, and further demonstrate Ranna's skill in blending hagiography with refined literary art.

Janna:

Janna, a distinguished 13th-century Jain poet who flourished in the Hoysala royal court, holds a revered place in the evolution of classical Kannada literature. Celebrated for his poetic brilliance and moral insight, Janna masterfully wove Jain philosophical themes—desire, karma, non-violence, and spiritual liberation—into powerful narratives. His literary artistry shines most vividly in Yashodhara Charite, a gripping tale marked by emotional intensity, dramatic scenes of violence and redemption, and profound ethical reflection. Alongside this, his works such as Ananthanatha Purana and Anubhava Mukhura further testify to his command over Kannada prosody and his deep commitment to Jain values.

Yashodhara Charite (1209 AD): A compact yet powerful epic composed in kanda padya, this narrative recounts the dramatic story

of King Yashodhara and his mother, exploring the darker extremes of human desire and the inexorable law of karma. With its vivid, sometimes shocking imagery, the work ultimately upholds the Jain ideals of ahimsa (non-violence) and compassion (jeevadaya), leading the reader toward moral reflection and spiritual awakening.

Ananthanatha Purana (1230 AD): Written in the elegant champu style, this Purana narrates the sacred life of the 14th Jain Tirthankara, Anantanatha, blending devotional sentiment with refined poetic expression.

Anubhava Mukhura: Another noteworthy composition that reflects Janna's lyrical craftsmanship and his ability to infuse philosophical themes with artistic grace.

Chavundaraya (940-989 CE):

Chavundaraya, a distinguished statesman of the Western Ganga dynasty, served as the general, chief minister, architect, and Jain poet under King Rachamalla IV. A multifaceted personality, he is remembered not only for his political and military leadership but also for his profound contributions to Jain literature and culture.

Chavundaraya Purana: Stands as one of the earliest prose compositions in Kannada. This text offers lucid and accessible narrative summaries of Jain biographies, focusing on the lives and deeds of the 24 Tirthankaras, especially Rishabhanatha, as well as the key figures of the first three sections of the Jain Trishashti Shalaka Purusha tradition. Written in simple yet powerful prose, it made complex Jain stories widely understandable to the common people.

The work emphasizes core Jain principles such as ahimsa (non-violence), the cycle of karma and rebirth, ethical renunciation, ascetic practices, and the path to moksha (liberation) through moral discipline. These themes highlight the spiritual greatness of Jain exemplars, portraying their victory over worldly attachments and adversities as models for devotees to emulate. At the same time, the text incorporates cosmological elements of Jain thought, including the structure of the universe and the sacred role of the Tirthankaras in guiding souls toward liberation.

Nagachandra II:

Nagachandra, often honored with the title "Abhinava Pampa" (the New Pampa), is one of the most brilliant Jain poets of medieval

Kannada literature. Flourishing in the 11th–12th century, he is best known for transforming traditional epic narratives into powerful Jain retellings enriched with spirituality, poetic elegance, and moral insight. His works beautifully blend classical Kannada poetics, Jain philosophical values, and epic imagination, earning him a distinguished place in Karnataka's literary heritage.

Ramacharitapurana (Ramachandra Charita Purana):

Nagachandra's masterpiece, Ramacharitapurana, is a remarkable Jain reinterpretation of the Ramayana. Written in the refined champu style, the work presents Lord Rama as a great human hero and later a Jain ascetic, aligning the story with Jain's ethical principles. Unlike the traditional versions, the epic emphasizes: Ahimsa (non-violence), Renunciation over warfare, Spiritual victory over physical conquest. The narrative is rich with emotional depth, philosophical reflections, and stylistic brilliance, making it one of the finest classical compositions in Kannada. Because of its mastery, the poet earned the title Abhinava Pampa, establishing his stature equal to the great Adikavi Pampa.

Mallinathapurana: A devotional and philosophical work narrating the life of the 19th Tirthankara, Mallinatha, celebrated for its graceful language and spiritual insight. Nagachandra is also believed to have composed other literary and philosophical texts, though some are lost or fragmentary. His commentaries display his scholarship in Jain doctrine, ethics, and classical Kannada grammar.

Nemichandra:

Nemichandra was a significant Jain Acharya in ancient Karnataka (10th–11th century), renowned for philosophical works such as Gommatasara, while another prominent Jain poet of the same name, active around 1170, authored Lilavati Prabandha and Kaviraja Kunjara, enriching Kannada literature with Jain narratives and philosophy under the patronage of the Chalukyas and Hoysalas, and laying the foundation for later great poets like Pampa and Ranna.

Conclusion:

Ancient Jain literature in Karnataka stands as a luminous chapter in the cultural and literary heritage of the region. Through the profound contributions of great poets like Pampa, Ponna, Ranna, Nagachandra, Janna, and many others, Jain writers not only shaped the foundations of

Kannada literature but also infused it with spiritual depth, philosophical clarity, and artistic excellence. Their works rooted in the ideals of ahimsa, karma, renunciation, and the quest for liberation elevated Kannada from a regional language to a powerful medium of classical expression.

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