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Nemgiri Hills of Jintur
A Historical and Architectural Study of Jain Heritage in Marathwada

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Abstract:

Nemgiri Hills, situated near Jintur in Parbhani district of Maharashtra, represent an important part of the Jain religious and cultural heritage of the Marathwada region. The sacred landscape, associated cave shrines, Jain images and continuing pilgrimage traditions provide valuable material for studying the relationship between religion, architecture and regional history. Nemgiri is associated with the worship of Tirthankaras, including Neminatha, Shantinatha and Parshvanatha. The nearby Chandragiri Hill forms part of the wider sacred complex. This paper examines Nemgiri as a historical and architectural site within the broader development of Jainism in the Deccan. It considers the physical setting of the hills, the arrangement and religious significance of the cave shrines, the artistic features of the images, and the role of community patronage in preserving the site. The study draws on the Maharashtra State Gazetteers: Parbhani (1967), published research on Jain architecture in Maharashtra, and pre-2025 documentary accounts of Nemgiri and Jain heritage in the Deccan. It distinguishes historical evidence from religious traditions and claims that requires an archaeological verification. The paper argues that Nemgiri is more than a place of worship. It is a source for investigating the history of Jain communities, the preservation of sacred images, the continuity of pilgrimage and the conservation of regional cultural heritage. Further examination of inscriptions, architectural details and archival records establish a clearer chronology of the site's development.

Keywords: *Nemgiri Hills, Jintur, Jainism, Marathwada, Jain architecture, Neminatha, religious heritage, Parbhani, cultural conservation.*

Introduction:

The history of Maharashtra includes the development of several religious traditions that contributed to its art, architecture, literature and social life. Jainism holds an important place in this history. Jain communities supported religious institutions, commissioned images, maintained places of worship and contributed to the development of sacred landscapes across different parts of the Deccan. Jain religious heritage in Maharashtra includes rock-cut caves, structural temples, sculptures, inscriptions and pilgrimage centres. These remains provide evidence of religious belief as well as artistic activity, patronage and social organisation (Meghal 2018). Marathwada, a historical region of present-day Maharashtra, possesses a rich cultural landscape shaped by successive political powers and

religious communities. Its temples, caves, forts, shrines and settlements reflect long periods of cultural interaction. The Maharashtra State Gazetteers: Parbhani provides a valuable starting point for understanding the district's historical and geographical background (Government of Maharashtra 1967). Within this setting, Nemgiri Hills near Jintur deserve special attention as a centre of Jain devotion and heritage.

Nemgiri is associated with a group of Jain cave shrines and sacred images. The religious complex is linked with Chandragiri, another hill forming part of the pilgrimage landscape. Accounts of the site describe images of Jain Tirthankaras and traditions of religious patronage and restoration. The present-day significance of the complex rests on both its material remains and the religious practices through which Jain communities continue to value it (Encyclopedia of Jainism 2023; Centre for Environment Education 2024).

Review of Literature:

The study of Nemgiri requires the use of district histories, research on Jain architecture, archaeological evidence and accounts preserved by Jain religious institutions. The available literature provides a starting point, although a detailed site-specific architectural survey would be necessary for a complete reconstruction of the monument's history. The Maharashtra State Gazetteers: Parbhani, published by the Government of Maharashtra in 1967, is an important reference for the historical, geographical and cultural background of the district. It includes discussion of the ancient and medieval periods and provides a framework for placing Jintur within the wider history of Parbhani (Government of Maharashtra 1967).

Pranoti Kiran Meghal's 2018 paper, “Development of Jain Architecture from Caves to Temple Architecture in Maharashtra,” examines the development of Jain architectural forms across different historical periods. It considers architectural features, materials, religious institutions and the influence of changing political and social conditions. This study provides a useful framework for analysing Nemgiri as part of Maharashtra's wider Jain architectural heritage (Meghal 2018). The edited volume Kevala-Bodhi: Buddhist and Jaina History of the Deccan (2004) brings together research on Buddhist and Jain traditions, including archaeology, sculpture, architecture, epigraphy, religious thought and social history. It demonstrates the importance of combining different kinds of evidence when reconstructing the history of religious communities in the Deccan (Parasher-Sen, Subrahmanyam, and Reddy 2004).

The Encyclopedia of Jainism entry on Nemgiri, published in 2023, describes the seven caves and identifies images associated with Mahavira, Adinatha, Shantinatha, Neminatha, Parshvanatha and Bahubali. It also preserves traditions about the restoration of Jain shrines and the reinstallation of sacred images in the early seventeenth century (Encyclopedia of Jainism 2023). The Centre for Environment Education's 2024 account similarly identifies

Nemgiri as a sacred mountain in Jintur taluka and describes its caves and images. It reports a traditional association between the site's development and the Rashtrakuta period, as well as a later restoration associated with Veer Sanghavi. These details are useful leads, but they are not treated as conclusive archaeological dates without corroboration from inscriptions, art-historical analysis or excavation records (Centre for Environment Education 2024).

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine Nemgiri Hills as a centre of Jain historical and architectural heritage in Marathwada.
2. To study the historical background of Nemgiri and its relationship with Jintur and the wider Parbhani region.
3. To examine the cave shrines and their architectural and sculptural features.
4. To understand the religious significance of the Jain Tirthankara images associated with the site.
5. To investigate the role of religious patronage and community participation in the preservation of Nemgiri.
6. To distinguish historical evidence from religious traditions and identify areas requiring further archaeological research.
7. To suggest measures for the documentation, conservation and educational interpretation of the site.

Research Methodology:

This paper follows a qualitative and historical approach. It is based on a review of published literature, district gazetteer material and documentary descriptions of Nemgiri available before 2025. The material has been examined thematically, with attention to historical development, architectural features, religious significance and conservation. The study uses three broad categories of evidence:

- Documentary sources: District histories, scholarly publications on Jain architecture and studies of Jainism in the Deccan.
- Site descriptions: Pre-2025 accounts describing the caves, images, religious traditions and restoration history of Nemgiri.
- Historical interpretation: Comparison of the available accounts to identify established information, traditional claims and questions that require further verification.

The study has an important limitation. It does not claim to be a completed archaeological survey or to present findings from personal fieldwork. No new measurements, interviews, inscription readings or scientific dating have been undertaken for this draft. Consequently,

the architectural analysis is based on published descriptions and general principles of historical interpretation.

Historical Background of Nemgiri Hills:

Geographical Setting:

Nemgiri is situated near Jintur in Parbhani district, in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra. Documentary accounts place the sacred complex approximately three kilometres from Jintur and identify Nemgiri and Chandragiri as its two principal hills (Centre for Environment Education 2024). The location is important because the natural setting forms part of the religious experience of the site. Hills, rock formations, paths and elevated places have long been used in India for religious retreat, meditation and pilgrimage. At Nemgiri, the relationship between the landscape and the cave shrines gives the complex a distinctive character. The site is studied as a form of sacred geography, in which a natural place acquires religious meaning through images, stories, rituals and repeated visits. The hills are not only a background to the temples. They help organise the movement of pilgrims and shape the experience of approaching the sacred images. A complete geographical study needs to map the paths between the caves, the relationship between Nemgiri and Chandragiri, the location of associated temples and the changes introduced by later construction. Such documentation would help distinguish the older sacred landscape from modern facilities.

Jainism in the Deccan

The history of Jainism in the Deccan developed through the movement of religious teachers, the support of rulers and local elites, the activities of merchant communities and the establishment of places of worship. Jain religious institutions were connected with wider cultural networks through pilgrimage, donations, image installation and the preservation of religious learning. The history of Jain architecture in Maharashtra reflects different periods of political and social change. Rock-cut shrines, structural temples and sculptural images show that religious architecture developed in response to the materials available, the resources of patrons and the needs of religious communities (Meghal 2018). Nemgiri belongs within this wider history. Its cave shrines and images indicate a sustained Jain religious presence in the Jintur region. However, the exact date of the earliest phase of the complex should not be determined solely from a general reference to the Rashtrakuta period. A more reliable chronology would require stylistic comparison, inscriptional evidence and a detailed architectural examination.

Nemgiri and the Rashtrakuta Period

Accounts of Nemgiri associate the earlier history of the area with the Rashtrakuta dynasty, the reign of Amoghavarsha I, a ruler of the ninth century known for his cultural and

religious patronage. The 2024 account of Nemgiri published by the Centre for Environment Education records this association (Centre for Environment Education 2024). This tradition places Nemgiri within a period of considerable importance in the political and cultural history of the Deccan. An association with a ruler or dynasty is not, by itself, proof that the surviving caves were constructed during that ruler's reign. To establish this, researchers would need securely dated inscriptions, reliable historical references or architectural features that is compared with monuments of known dates. The possibility of an early medieval phase deserves further investigation. It is treated as a historical hypothesis to be tested, rather than as a settled date for every cave and sculpture at the site.

The Tradition of Jainpur:

Some accounts state that the area was formerly known as Jainpur and describe it as an important Jain settlement. They also refer to a larger number of Jain temples in the past, of which only a smaller number survive today (Encyclopedia of Jainism 2023). These accounts preserve a community memory of an extensive Jain presence in the region. However, the former name, the number of temples and the reasons for their disappearance need independent confirmation through older records, inscriptions, archaeological remains and local histories. The name tradition remains significant because it expresses how the Jain community understands the historical identity of the area. A careful historical study should record this tradition while clearly distinguishing it from information independently established by documentary evidence.

Restoration and the Seventeenth Century:

The 2023 Encyclopedia of Jainism account associates the restoration of Nemgiri's shrines and images with Veer Sanghavi and describes the reinstallation of major images in 1611 (Encyclopedia of Jainism 2023). The 2024 account from the Centre for Environment Education also records a restoration tradition linked to the early seventeenth century (Centre for Environment Education 2024).

Architectural Study of Nemgiri Hills:

The Cave Shrines as Religious Spaces

The most distinctive feature of Nemgiri is its group of cave shrines. The documentary account published by the Centre for Environment Education in 2024 describes seven caves on Nemgiri Hill, each associated with Jain images or religious features (Centre for Environment Education 2024). The caves provide an opportunity to study how natural rock formations were adapted for religious purposes. A cave shrine creates a different worshipping environment from a large structural temple. Its entrance, interior space and relationship to the surrounding rock influence how visitors approach the image and experience the shrine. The comparatively small entrance and the larger images described in

the published account are interesting architectural features. If verified through direct measurements, this relationship could help researchers understand how the cave interiors were planned and how the images were installed. However, the method of installation should not be assumed without examining the original rock surfaces, entrances and surrounding structures.

The Seven Caves and Their Principal Images:

The following table summarises the images identified in the 2024 documentary description of Nemgiri. The identifications are based on that published account and should be checked against the present condition of the caves.

Table 1.1 Caves Information:

Cave	Image or feature described	Historical and artistic significance
Cave 1	Mahavira in a seated posture	Associated with the twenty-fourth Tirthankara and the Jain ideal of spiritual liberation.
Cave 2	Adinatha in a meditative posture	Represents the first Tirthankara in Jain tradition.
Cave 3	Shantinatha, described as approximately six feet high	Illustrates the importance of monumental Tirthankara images in the sacred complex.
Cave 4	Neminatha, described as approximately 7.5 feet high	Important to the site's religious identity and its association with the name Nemgiri.
Cave 5	Parshvanatha with a serpent hood	Associated with the well-known Antariksha Parshvanath tradition.
Cave 6	A standing, four-faced image or pillar-like figure	Requires closer examination to establish its precise iconographic identification and architectural function.
Cave 7	Bahubali in a standing posture	Associated with the Jain ideal of ascetic discipline, meditation and detachment.

(Source: Centre for Environment Education (2024). Measurements and identifications are reported from this secondary account)

The presence of images associated with several Tirthankaras gives the cave complex considerable importance for the study of Jain iconography. Rather than concentrating on a single sacred figure, the complex brings together images representing different parts of the Jain religious tradition.

Image of Neminatha

Neminatha, the twenty-second Tirthankara in Jain tradition, occupies an important place in the identity of Nemgiri. The published site description identifies the image of Neminatha in Cave 4 as a major image within the complex (Centre for Environment Education 2024). The image's scale and its position inside the cave make it an important subject for art-historical investigation. Researchers should examine its posture, bodily proportions, surface treatment, pedestal, identifying symbols and any inscriptions associated with it. These features can help establish its iconographic identity and assist in placing it within a broader artistic tradition. The name Nemgiri is also associated in published accounts with Neminatha. The relationship between the sacred hill's name and the Tirthankara is significant for understanding the religious identity of the place. However, the historical development of the name requires linguistic and documentary investigation before its origin is treated as conclusively established.

Image of Parshvanatha and the Antariksha Tradition:

The image of Parshvanatha in Cave 5 is among the most distinctive elements of Nemgiri's religious identity. Published accounts describe the figure with a serpent hood and associate it with the name Antariksha Parshvanath (Centre for Environment Education 2024; Encyclopedia of Jainism 2023). The word Antariksha forms part of a religious tradition that describes the image as appearing to be suspended or supported in an unusual way. This account is important for understanding how the image is experienced by devotees and why it holds a special position in local religious practice. Historical scholarship must distinguish the religious meaning of this tradition from a technical explanation of the sculpture's support. To understand the image's actual construction, an architectural survey would need to document its base, points of contact, surrounding rock, later additions and any structural alterations. The importance of the image does not depend on treating the devotional account as a proven physical phenomenon. Its religious reputation, the community's attachment to it and its place in the site's history are all legitimate subjects of historical research.

Image of Bahubali:

The image of Bahubali described in Cave 7 provides another important element of the site's sculptural heritage. Bahubali is associated in Jain tradition with renunciation, meditation and freedom from attachment to worldly concerns. The standing posture is relevant to the interpretation of the image. In Jain art, posture, bodily restraint and the absence of unnecessary movement can communicate spiritual discipline. The image should therefore be studied in relation to its physical form, the treatment of the body, any identifying features and the surrounding cave environment.

Sculptural Style and Artistic Technique:

The Jain images at Nemgiri are important for the study of regional sculpture. Their scale, posture and placement provide evidence of the artistic decisions made when sacred images were created and installed.

A systematic sculptural study records the following features:

- The material and visible condition of each image.
- The posture and identifying symbols of each Tirthankara.
- The treatment of the face, hair, shoulders, hands and feet.
- The presence of serpent hoods, attendant figures, pedestals or other iconographic details.
- Any inscriptions, damage, repairs or later surface treatments.
- The relationship between each sculpture and the rock-cut space around it.

Meghal's study of Jain architecture in Maharashtra provides a useful broader framework for such research because it considers the relationship between religious architecture, materials, artistic features and historical change (Meghal 2018).

Chandragiri Hill and the Wider Sacred Complex:

Nemgiri cannot be studied fully without considering its relationship with Chandragiri. Published descriptions identify the two hills as parts of the same Jain sacred landscape (Centre for Environment Education 2024). Accounts of Chandragiri refer to a Chaubisi, a group of twenty-four images representing the twenty-four Tirthankaras. This arrangement is important because it connects the individual shrines to the complete sequence of Tirthankaras recognised in Jain tradition. The relationship between the two hills also offers an opportunity to study pilgrimage movement. The sequence in which devotees visit the shrines, the paths between the hills and the location of gathering spaces reveal how the sacred complex is organised in practice. A proper architectural plan includes both hills, the cave entrances, image locations, paths, steps, later temples and associated facilities. It also distinguishes older features from modern additions. This would make it possible to study the complex as a connected religious landscape rather than as a series of separate monuments.

Religious Significance of Nemgiri:

Nemgiri as a Centre of Jain Devotion

Nemgiri is an important place of Jain worship because its caves and images provide a physical setting for religious practices centred on the Tirthankaras. These figures represent ideals of spiritual discipline, knowledge, self-control and liberation. The religious importance of the site is expressed through worship, prayer, ritual observance, pilgrimage and the preservation of sacred images. Such practices help maintain a connection between present-day devotees and the site's historical past. The continuity of religious use is itself an important subject for historians. Even where the original date of a cave or sculpture is uncertain, the history of its worship, restoration and community management provide evidence of the site's changing role over time.

The Meaning of the Tirthankara Images

The images associated with Mahavira, Adinatha, Shantinatha, Neminatha, Parshvanatha and Bahubali represent different aspects of Jain religious memory. The Tirthankaras is Jainism are as spiritual teachers who attain liberation and show the path towards it. Their images are simply decorative objects. They serve as focal points for religious reflection and worship. The presence of multiple images at Nemgiri also illustrates the role of sculpture in preserving religious ideas. Through their visual forms, the images communicate ideals of meditation, renunciation and spiritual achievement to successive generations of devotees.

Pilgrimage and Community Memory

Pilgrimage connects religious places with wider communities. People visit sacred sites to worship, participate in festivals, fulfil religious obligations and maintain family or community traditions. At Nemgiri, stories about the caves, the images and the restoration of the site form part of its religious memory. Such narratives deserve documentation because they reveal how the community understands its heritage. Oral accounts are recorded with information about the speaker, the date of the interview and the context in which the tradition is transmitted. Where different versions exist, the differences are preserved rather than forced into a single account. Community memory guides historical research by identifying inscriptions, old structures, records or objects that otherwise receive little attention. Oral traditions should be compared with documentary and archaeological evidence when they are used to establish dates or reconstruct events.

Patronage, Restoration and Historical Continuity:

The Role of Religious Patrons:

Religious monuments require resources for their construction, the creation of images, ritual use and maintenance. Jain heritage sites across Maharashtra developed within social settings in which donors and religious communities played important roles (Meghal 2018). The restoration tradition associated with Veer Sanghavi at Nemgiri suggests a possible example of community patronage during the early seventeenth century. The account in the Encyclopedia of Jainism describes the restoration and reinstallation of images around 1611 (Encyclopedia of Jainism 2023). A detailed historical investigation seeks contemporary or near-contemporary inscriptions, donor records, temple accounts and other documentary evidence. Such sources could help establish the identity of the patron, the work undertaken and the extent to which the existing caves were altered.

Preservation of Images:

The published accounts of Nemgiri refer to images being restored or relocated and to older images being preserved in temples at Jintur. These reports suggest that the preservation of sacred sculptures forms an important part of the site's history (Encyclopedia of Jainism 2023). Relocation helps protect an image in certain circumstances, but it also changes the relationship between the sculpture and its original architectural setting. For historians, it is important to document both the image and the place from which it came. A proper inventory is recorded the current location of each image, its identification, dimensions, material, condition and any known history of movement or restoration. Where the original location is uncertain, that uncertainty should be stated clearly.

Historical Change and Continuity:

Nemgiri demonstrates the importance of studying religious sites over more than one historical period. The complex is associated with early medieval traditions, later restoration narratives and continuing religious practice. These layers are not treated as evidence of an unchanged monument. Caves have been modified, images have been moved, and new facilities have been added as the needs of worshippers changed. The history of the site is the best understood as a process of continuity and change. Its religious identity has been maintained through worship and community memory, while its physical form reflects several phases of construction, repair and adaptation.

Nemgiri in the History of Marathwada:

Nemgiri contributes to the history of Marathwada by providing a local example of Jain religious life, artistic production and heritage preservation. It also encourages a broader understanding of the region's history beyond the political history of dynasties and rulers.

Historical writing often gives considerable attention to kingdoms, wars, administrative systems and major monuments. Religious sites such as Nemgiri allow historians to investigate other dimensions of the past, including the activities of local communities, the creation of sacred images, the organisation of pilgrimage and the transmission of cultural memory.

The site is also relevant to the study of regional connections. Jainism developed across the Deccan through networks of religious teachers, patrons and communities. Nemgiri is examined within these wider connections, although specific links with other centres should be established through inscriptions, stylistic evidence or documentary references rather than assumed from geographical proximity alone. The Maharashtra State Gazetteers: Parbhani provides the district-level historical framework for such work, while the broader scholarship on Jain architecture and Jain history in the Deccan offers comparative perspectives (Government of Maharashtra 1967; Meghal 2018; Parasher-Sen, Subrahmanyam, and Reddy 2004). Nemgiri's importance lies in its capacity to connect local history with larger questions about religion, art, patronage and cultural continuity in the Deccan.

Findings of the Study:

The available literature supports several observations about Nemgiri's historical and cultural importance.

- First, Nemgiri is an important Jain heritage site in Parbhani district. Its location near Jintur, its group of cave shrines and its sacred images establish its relevance to the religious history of Marathwada. The site deserves a place in broader studies of Jainism in Maharashtra (Government of Maharashtra 1967; Centre for Environment Education 2024).
- Second, the cave shrines offer valuable material for architectural research. Their entrances, interiors, sculptural placement and relationship with the natural landscape provide opportunities to study the adaptation of rock spaces for religious use. Detailed measurement and stylistic analysis are still needed to establish a stronger architectural chronology.
- Third, the images represent an important part of the site's religious identity. The reported presence of Mahavira, Adinatha, Shantinatha, Neminatha, Parshvanatha and Bahubali provides a basis for studying Jain iconography and the relationship between sculpture and worship (Centre for Environment Education 2024).
- Fourth, the history of Nemgiri involves both material remains and community traditions. Accounts of restoration and image reinstallation suggest that later generations played an important role in maintaining the sacred complex. These traditions are valuable historical sources, although the precise chronology requires corroboration through inscriptions and archival evidence (Encyclopedia of Jainism 2023).
- Fifth, Nemgiri illustrates the need to combine different historical methods. District histories, archaeological observations, epigraphic records, architectural analysis and oral

traditions can contribute different kinds of information. No single source is sufficient to establish the complete history of the site.

- Finally, conservation should include both the physical monument and its cultural context. Protecting the caves and images is important, but so is documenting the religious practices, stories and community knowledge associated with them.

Conclusion:

Nemgiri Hills of Jintur represent a significant part of the Jain heritage of Marathwada. The cave shrines, sculptural images and religious traditions associated with the complex provide valuable material for studying the development of Jain worship, architecture and cultural memory in the Deccan. The site's importance extends beyond the religious meaning of its images. Its history offers an opportunity to examine how sacred places develop over time, how communities maintain their religious institutions and how older monuments acquire new meanings through continued worship and restoration. The relationship between Nemgiri and Chandragiri also makes the complex suitable for research into sacred geography and pilgrimage. Nemgiri deserves recognition as a valuable historical, architectural and religious landscape of Parbhani district. Its careful study can contribute to the history of Jainism in Maharashtra while supporting the preservation of an important part of the region's cultural heritage.

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