



**JAINA TEMPLES IN RAJASTHAN (C.8TH – 15TH CENTURY):
ARCHITECTURE, PATRONAGE AND CULTURAL MILIEUS**

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ABSTRACT

This article re-examines Jaina temples in early medieval Rajasthan by bringing together architectural analysis, inscriptional evidence and the socio-economic contexts of their production. Rather than treating these temples either as isolated religious monuments or as purely stylistic developments, it argues for a more integrated reading in which architecture, patronage and cultural networks are understood as interdependent processes.

Between roughly the eighth and fifteenth centuries CE, Rajasthan witnessed the expansion of Jaina sacred architecture alongside the rise of influential merchant communities. The article suggests that temple construction should be understood not only as an expression of religious devotion but also as a structured mode of social and economic practice. Merchant patronage played a central role in converting wealth into enduring forms of cultural and religious visibility, particularly through temple building and inscriptional commemoration.

Architecturally, the development of the Maru-Gurjara style reflects the convergence of aesthetic refinement and sustained patronage networks. Its complex spatial organisation and detailed carving practices point to a close relationship between ritual requirements, artistic labour and material resources. At the same time, pilgrimage routes and artisan mobility contributed to the circulation of architectural forms across western India, embedding Rajasthan within wider regional networks.

By situating Jaina temples at the intersection of architecture, economy and inscriptional culture, this article offers a relational reading of sacred space in early medieval Rajasthan. It argues that these temples functioned as dynamic institutions through which religious meaning, social identity and economic power were continuously negotiated.



INTRODUCTION

The history of early medieval Rajasthan is often associated with the rise of Rajput political formations and the consolidation of their regional authority. While this political narrative is important, it tends to obscure equally significant developments in religious and economic aspects that were unfolding at the same time. Among these, the expansion of Jainism and the rapid growth of temple construction stand out as particularly important phenomena. Between roughly the eighth and fifteenth centuries CE, Rajasthan witnessed the gradual emergence of an extensive and interconnected network of Jaina temples, ranging from small shrines in emerging trade settlements to monumental temple complexes such as Mount Abu and Ranakpur.

While the term “early medieval” is conventionally used in Indian historiography for the period roughly up to the twelfth century CE, this article extends its chronological frame to the fifteenth century in order to capture the longer continuity of Jaina temple-building traditions in Rajasthan. This extension is not meant to collapse distinct historical phases but rather to highlight how architectural styles, patronage systems and mercantile networks developed gradually over time with significant regional continuity.

These temples were not isolated religious structures. They were deeply embedded in the social and economic fabric of the region, especially in the networks of trade and mercantile activity. Jaina merchant communities, who had become increasingly influential in western India, played a crucial role in shaping this architectural landscape. Their economic prosperity combined with the Jaina ethical framework that allowed lay participation in worldly life, created favourable conditions for large-scale religious patronage.

Earlier scholarship on Indian temple architecture, particularly that of Percy Brown and Stella Kramrisch, approached these structures primarily through stylistic and symbolic lenses. Although their work laid the foundation for the classification and formal description of these structures but they often treat these temples as aesthetic objects detached from the socio-economic contexts of their production. Kramrisch in particular, in *The Hindu Temple*, interprets temple architecture through a deeply metaphysical framework, viewing the temple as a cosmic structure embodying universal order. While this symbolic reading has been extremely influential, it tends to abstract the temple away from its historical conditions of production. The



material realities of patronage, labour organisation and mercantile wealth remain largely secondary in such interpretations.

In contrast, later scholars including, Julia A.B. Hegewald and John E. Cort, shifted the focus towards ritual space, religious ideology and community formation. Hegewald's architectural studies provide detailed spatial readings of Jaina temples, emphasising how movement and ritual shape architectural form. Cort, meanwhile, draws attention to Jaina ethical systems and community structures, particularly the integration of lay devotion and economic life. However, even these interventions often do not fully integrate the economic mechanisms through which such monumental architecture was made possible. While this marked an important advance, these interpretations still tend to privilege cultural and symbolic readings over the material conditions of patronage.

Recent contribution by Shalin Jain further expands the discussion by emphasising the role of pilgrimage networks, elite patronage and Jaina community identity formation in medieval India. His work is particularly valuable for highlighting how Jaina religious life operated through interconnected social and spatial networks. However, even here, the direct relationship between these networks and the architectural production of temple space remains unexplored.

This article builds on these strands of scholarship while attempting to bring them into closer dialogue. It argues that Jaina temples in early medieval Rajasthan must be understood as material expressions of a broader socio-economic order in which mercantile wealth, political negotiation and religious ideology were closely intertwined. Methodologically, it adopts a socio-historical approach that integrates architectural analysis with inscriptional evidence and historiographical debate, allowing for a more layered understanding of temple culture.

JAINISM, TRADE AND THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE

The expansion of Jainism in Rajasthan cannot be understood without reference to the broader economic transformations of early medieval western India. The region was a crucial part of long-distance trade routes connecting Gujarat, Malwa and Northern India. These routes facilitated not only the movement of goods but also the circulation of ideas, artistic practices and religious communities.



Within this commercial environment, Jaina merchant groups such as the Oswals, Porwals, Shrimalis emerged as influential actors. Their economic success was not merely incidental to religious development; it actively shaped the material conditions under which Jaina institutions flourished. Jainism, with its emphasis on ethical conduct, non-violence and the possibility of lay participation in religious life, provided an ideological framework that aligned well with mercantile values.

As John E. Cort has pointed out, Jaina lay practice allows a productive balance between worldly engagement and spiritual aspiration. Wealth, rather than being renounced outright, can be ritually transformed into religious merit through acts of donation and temple construction. In this sense, temple-building becomes a key mechanism through which economic surplus is converted into moral and social capital.

Politically, early medieval Rajasthan was characterised by fragmented authority structures with regional dynasties such as the Chauhans and Paramaras exercising fluctuating control over territories. In such a context, economic actors often played a mediating role between rulers and local communities. Jaina merchants because of their financial importance occupied a particularly influential position within these networks. Temple patronage thus emerged as a space where economic power, political legitimacy and religious aspiration intersected.

ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE MARU-GURJARA TRADITION

The architectural idiom commonly associated with Jaina temples in Rajasthan is the Maru-Gurjara style. This style developed gradually between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries and is characterised by a high degree of ornamental complexity, structural articulation and spatial refinement.

As M.A. Dhaky has argued, Maru-Gurjara architecture represents a synthesis of earlier Nagara traditions with regionally specific innovations. One of its most distinctive features is the articulation of exterior surfaces through deeply carved projections and recesses, creating a dynamic interplay of light and shadow. The sikhara or superstructure is often composed of multiple clustered spires, giving the temple a visually layered vertical profile.



However, it is the interior spaces that the architectural sophistication of these temples becomes apparent. At sites such as Mount Abu, particularly the Dilwara temples, the mandapas and ceilings are carved with extraordinary precision. The use of concentric geometric and floral motifs creates a sense of rhythmic expansion, drawing the devotee's gaze inward and upward.

Earlier interpretations especially those influenced by Stella Kramrisch, tend to emphasise the symbolic or cosmological dimensions of such architectural forms. While these interpretations are intellectually rich, they often abstract the temple from the socio-economic conditions of its production. The scale and refinement of these structures suggest not only devotional intent but also the availability of substantial patronage networks and highly skilled artisan communities.

It is therefore more appropriate to view Maru-Gurjara architecture as the outcome of a convergence between religious ideology and material resources. The temple becomes not only a symbolic space but also a material record of economic investment and social ambition.

It is also worth noting that the visual richness of these temples did not operate only at the level of elite appreciation. Even for ordinary devotees, the density of carving and the repetition of forms created a sense of immersion that did not require specialised knowledge to be meaningful. The temple could be experienced simply by moving through it, by looking, pausing and returning to certain spaces. In this way, architectural detail functioned at multiple levels, allowing both informed interpretation and more immediate forms of engagement. This layered accessibility may partly explain the enduring appeal of Jaina temple spaces in Rajasthan, where aesthetic experience and devotional practice remained closely intertwined without requiring a rigid separation between the two.

SPATIAL ORGANISATION AND RITUAL EXPERIENCE

Jaina temple architecture is carefully structured around a progression from exterior to interior space. The architectural sequence typically begins with an entrance porch leading into one or more mandapas, which function as gathering and ritual preparation spaces. These lead finally to the garbhagriha, the innermost sanctum where the image of the Tirthankara is installed.

This spatial progression is not merely functional but deeply experiential. The gradual reduction in scale, increasing complexity of ornamentation and controlled lighting conditions all



contribute to a heightened sense of transition from the mundane to the sacred. Ritual movement through the temple thus becomes an embodied experience of spiritual ascent.

Many temples also include subsidiary shrines (devikulikas), which expand the ritual universe of the complex. These allow for the simultaneous worship of multiple Tirthankaras, reflecting the pluralistic devotional practices within Jainism. The architectural inclusion of these elements suggests a flexible and inclusive approach to sacred space.

Ritual practices such as circumambulation are fully integrated into the architectural design. The movement of devotees around the sanctum reinforces the spatial logic of devotion, linking physical movement with spiritual progression.

PATRONAGE, INSCRIPTIONS AND SOCIAL MEANING

The question of patronage is central to understanding Jaina temple construction in Rajasthan. Unlike many major Brahmanical temple complexes, which were often associated with royal patronage, Jaina temples were predominantly funded by merchant elites and in some cases by high-ranking ministers.

This pattern of patronage is clearly reflected in inscriptional evidence. The inscription associated with Vimal Shah at Mount Abu (c.1031 CE), linked to the Vimal Vasahi temple, explicitly frames temple-building as an act of religious merit while simultaneously situating the patron within the political hierarchy of the Solanki court. This dual representation reveals the inseparability of religious devotion and social status.

Similarly, the Ranakpur inscription associated with Dharna Shah situates the construction of the temple within a broader network of pilgrimage, royal support and mercantile mobility under Rana Kumbha. The inscription not only records an act of donation but also embeds it within a larger cultural geography of movement and exchange.

At Osian, earlier, Jaina temples further demonstrate the integration of mercantile patronage with emerging trade networks. These examples collectively indicate that temple construction was not an isolated act of piety but part of a broader system of economic circulation and social negotiation.



Patronage, therefore, must be understood as a form of social expression in which wealth, religious identity and political positioning were simultaneously articulated.

An additional dimension of Jaina temple patronage in Rajasthan lies in its role in consolidating intergenerational social memory. Temple construction was often not an isolated act of individual piety but part of a broader familial strategy of cultural preservation and status assertion. Merchant families repeatedly invested in the same sacred centres across generations, ensuring that their names remained inscribed within the religious landscape long after their economic activities had diversified. In this sense, temples functioned as durable markers of lineage prestige, embedding mercantile identity within sacred geography. This process also contributed to the gradual institutionalisation of pilgrimage centres, as repeated acts of patronage transformed specific sites into enduring nodes of religious and economic significance.

It is also important to recognise that temple patronage was not always a straightforward reflection of economic capacity but could also respond to moments of uncertainty and change. Periods of political transition or shifts in regional power structures did not necessarily halt temple construction, in some cases, they appear to have encouraged it, investing in religious architecture may have provided a form of stability in an otherwise changing environment, allowing merchant groups to anchor themselves within a recognised sacred and social framework.

In such contexts, temple building could serve as a strategy for negotiating visibility and legitimacy. By associating themselves with established religious traditions and prominent sacred sites, patrons were able to situate their identities within a more durable cultural order. This suggests that religious patronage was not only an expression of prosperity but could also function as a response to instability offering a way to create continuity through material and ritual means.

This perspective also helps explain the sustained investment in temple sites over long periods, even when economic or political conditions may not have been entirely stable. Rather than being tied to a single moment of growth, temple patronage reflects a longer process in which communities sought to maintain presence, recognition and continuity within a shifting



historical landscape. The broader perspective also helps situate Jaina temples within the everyday social world of the period, where religious practice, economic life and community identity were closely interconnected rather than sharply separated.

CULTURAL MILIEUS AND SACRED NETWORKS

Jaina temples functioned as nodes within wider cultural and spatial networks. Over time, major temple sites evolved into pilgrimage centres, linking dispersed Jaina communities across regions. These networks facilitated not only religious movement but also the circulation of goods, ideas and artistic practices.

Temples also served intellectual and educational functions. Many housed manuscript collections and supported monastic scholarship, making them important centres of textual transmission. In addition, artisan mobility contributed to stylistic continuity across regions, resulting in a shared visual language that transcended local boundaries.

The cultural significance of these temples thus extended far beyond their immediate religious function. They were embedded in broader systems of communication and exchange that shaped the cultural geography of early medieval Rajasthan.

A further aspect that deserves attention is the relationship between permanence and change in Jaina temple traditions in Rajasthan. While these temples are often studied in terms of their original construction, their historical significance lies equally in their continued use and adaptation over time. Temple complexes were not static entities, they were repeatedly modified, repaired and expanded in response to shifting patterns of patronage and devotional practice. This ongoing engagement meant that the temple remained a living institution rather than a finished monument.

Such continuity also shaped the ways in which communities interacted with these spaces. Devotees did not encounter the temple as something newly constructed but as something already layered with the presence of earlier donors, inscriptions and ritual histories. In this sense, temple space accumulated meaning gradually, becoming richer through repeated acts of patronage and worship. The visibility of earlier inscriptions and architectural additions



reinforced this sense of continuity, allowing successive generations to situate themselves within an ongoing tradition.

At the same time, this process of accumulation did not prevent change. New patrons introduced additional structures, stylistic variations and inscriptions that reflected their own contexts and priorities. As a result, temple complexes often display a combination of continuity and variation, where older forms coexist with later interventions. This layered character is essential to understanding Jaina temple architecture in Rajasthan, as it highlights the dynamic relationship between stability and transformation.

Seen in this way, Jaina temples were not simply products of a single historical moment but evolving spaces shaped by long-term social, economic and religious processes. Their endurance reflects not only the strength of Jaina devotional traditions but also the ability of these institutions to remain meaningful across changing historical conditions.

SECTARIAN IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS NEGOTIATION

Although Digambara and Svetambara traditions were already established as distinct sectarian formations by the early medieval period, their articulation in material and ritual contexts in Rajasthan does not always appear rigid or uniformly expressed. Both traditions possessed clearly differentiated doctrinal positions, monastic practices and textual canons; however, the archaeological and epigraphic record suggests that the lived religious landscape did not always map neatly onto later normative sectarian classifications.

In certain cases, temple iconography, patronage patterns and regional devotional practices reflect overlapping influences or locally specific adaptations rather than strictly uniform sectarian expression. This does not imply fluidity in the sense of blurred identities but rather indicates that sectarian boundaries were often mediated by regional contexts, patron networks and ritual pragmatism.

Temple patronage could therefore contribute to the consolidation of sectarian identity, particularly through the installation of specific images and the affiliation of shrines with particular monastic lineages. At the same time, these processes were gradual and context-dependent, shaped as much by local social conditions as by doctrinal distinctions. This suggests



that sectarian identity in early medieval Rajasthan should be understood as structured but regionally negotiated rather than entirely fixed in material practice.

CONCLUSION

Jaina temples in early medieval Rajasthan represent complex historical formations in which religious meaning, economic activity and social organisation are deeply intertwined. They were not merely architectural monuments but active institutions through which communities expressed identity, negotiated status and embedded themselves within broader networks of power and exchange.

The Maru-Gurjara architectural tradition reflects not only aesthetic innovation but also the material conditions of sustained patronage and skilled labour organisation. Its refinement suggests the presence of stable economic systems capable of supporting large-scale artistic production over extended periods.

Inscriptions further reveal that temple-building functioned as a socially meaningful act that connected individual donors to wider structures of political authority and mercantile prestige. These records demonstrate how religious merit was closely linked to social recognition and economic visibility.

Taken together, architecture, inscription and spatial organisation show that Jaina temples were deeply embedded in the cultural and economic life of early medieval Rajasthan. They were spaces where material wealth, religious aspiration and social identity were continuously negotiated and made visible.

Ultimately, these temples stand as enduring witnesses to a historical world in which devotion was not separate from economy or society but part of a single interconnected system of meaning and practice.

At the same time, the continued presence and relevance of these temples across centuries suggests that they cannot be understood solely within the context of their initial construction. Many of these sites remained active long after their foundation, undergoing renovation, expansion and reinterpretation by later communities. This continuity points to the adaptability



of Jaina religious institutions, which were able to respond to changing social and political conditions while maintaining a recognisable architectural and ritual framework.

The study of Jaina temples in Rajasthan, therefore also invites a broader reflection on how sacred spaces endure over time. Rather than being fixed monuments tied to a single historical moment, they function as layered sites in which multiple generations leave their mark. Architecture, inscription and patronage together create a cumulative record of these engagements, allowing us to trace not only moments of origin but also processes of continuity and transformation.

In this sense, the significance of these temples lies not only in their form or patronage but in their capacity to sustain meaning across time, linking past communities with those that followed.

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