

The Great Mahāmastakābhiṣeka

Julia A.B. Hegewald

On 8th February 2006, Ashoka Kumar Patni, a marble-trader from Rajasthan, poured the first pot of sacred water over the tenth-century image of Gommateśvara at Śravaṇabelgoḷa. This opened the ritual proceedings, which were to last for a period of almost two weeks. Months and years of planning and preparations had preceded this auspicious moment. Temporary tent cities, supplied with electricity, running water, health posts and makeshift temple structures had been established in close vicinity around the pilgrimage centre. On the summit of sacred Mount Vindhyagiri, scaffolding had been constructed around the colossal statue, providing a podium from where thousands of litres of sacred substances were later to be released over the head of the ancient figure. Viewing platforms were constructed around the courtyard area in front of the image, to accommodate between 6.000 and 10.000 pilgrims each day. This provided the necessary infrastructure for this rare, large-scale sacred event, but did not present the end of the preparations. All sacred substances, required for the sacred bath of Lord Bāhubali, had to be freshly delivered to the base of the hill, and carried up by porters on every morning of the festive period. The apparent ease and the exactness with which each step of the organisation and performance was implemented conveyed the feeling of control and of a certain routine, betraying the fact that this special ritual is only conducted once every twelve to fifteen years.



108 water pots are arranged in the shape of a ritual diagram at the foot of the colossal image.

For the pilgrims, dressed in bright orange and white garments, who were queuing in lines stretching from the foot of the hill to the centre of town, and who from about 6am were starting to climb the hill barefoot in the rising sun, this day was unique and represented the moment they would remember for the rest of their lives. Those too frail to walk were carried up on seats. Having reached the summit of the hill, ritual attendants were directed towards places on the large platforms surrounding the courtyard. Devotees prayed, chanted, and gazed in reverence at the monumental statue of Gommateśa. Soon, the activities in the open court formed the centre of at-



Scaffolding has been constructed around the statue of Bāhubali in preparation of the great ritual.

tention. Large numbers of voluntary helpers were involved in carrying 108 water pots, *kalaśas*, into the open and in arranging them in the shape of an auspicious geometric diagram. The copper containers were decorated with leaves and coconuts, the sacred area accommodating them was delineated with protective markings, and the head priest commenced with the ritual purification of the substances.

The sun stood already high in the sky by the time a line of donors formed and started to hand on one sacred pot after the other, to be carried up the steps to the sides of the 60 foot (20m) tall colossus. The performance had reached its climax, and the anointing ceremony of Bāhubali was to begin. Accompanied by the joyful and at times ecstatic cries of thousands of believers, sacred water collected from 108 places, then coconut milk, sugar cane juice and milk were poured over the figure. At first resembling smoke, rice flour was released from above and drifted in large white clouds over statue and onlookers alike. This was followed by yellow turmeric paste and other herbal liquids, interspersed by the contents of larger silver *kalaśas*, filled with sanctified water. Visually particularly striking, were a variety of sandal wood mixtures in shades ranging from light brown, via purple to deep red, which coloured the grey stone of the sculpture. Towards the finish of the anointing ritual, at the end of the afternoon, a shower of strongly scented flower buds and petals of diverse colours were released from baskets, and a garland was ceremoniously raised to decorate the monumental image. A mixture of holy substances, known as *indra*, concluded the anointing ceremony, followed by the performance of *ārati*, the rotating of a flame in front of the image.

Tired, but filled with extraordinary sights, smells and the moving experience of the day's events, the pilgrims slowly and patiently commenced their descent on the west side of the hill. The colourful sacred liquids, which had run over the body of the statue (*tīrtha*), were carefully gathered by devotees and priests and carried away in flasks. Flowers collected from the feet of lord Bāhubali were distributed amongst the pilgrims, and participating families proudly paraded their empty *kalaśas* and sanctified coconuts back into town.

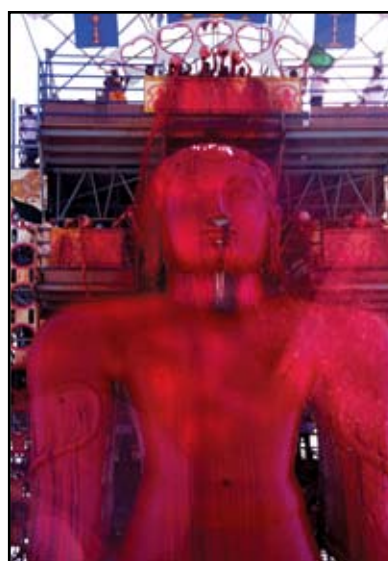
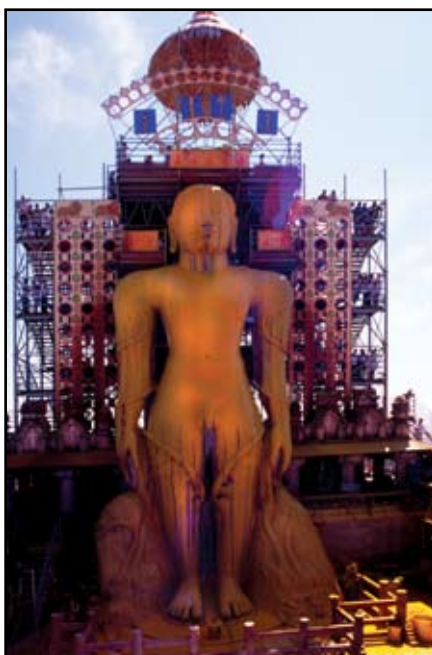
The Great Head Anointing Ceremony of Gommaṭa was performed for the first time during the installation ceremony of the colossal sculpture. Gaṅgā minister Cāmuṇḍarāja had commissioned the carving of the monumental figure of Gommaṭeśvara in 980 AD. Since then, the sacred bath has been repeated at regular intervals, ideally every twelve years. Due to wars and famines, however, the period had at times to be extended, as was the case with the present ceremony. A severe drought which affected this region in 2005, led to the postponement of the event by a year.

Research Group on Jainism in Karnataka

The ritual proceedings outlined here, were recorded by the research group “Jainism in Karnataka.” Headed by Dr Julia A. B. Hegewald, this project is based at the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg. Three members of the team of five were able to be present during the proceedings. Dr Julia Hegewald, Dr Pius Pinto and Sabine Scholz were joined by Prof. Edward Noronha from the University of Mysore. The work of the group included the documentation of the lengthy preparations, the examination of the various steps of the ritual and their associated meanings, interviews with pilgrims and ascetics taking part in the event, and visits to Jaina temples and sacred sites in

close vicinity to Śravaṇabelgoḷa. Whilst the rare event of the Mahāmastakābhiṣeka has led the team to conduct extensive research into the history and development of Śravaṇabelgoḷa, representations of Bāhubali, and the significance of *abhiṣeka* in Jainism, the interdisciplinary project was founded in February 2005 to address questions relating to a different but related area.

In Karnataka, the Jainas experienced a period of great political and cultural flourishing, which lasted from about the 5th to the early 12th century CE. During this period, many local kings and their ministers were Jainas or at least generously supported Jainism. In the early 12th century, however, the influence of the local Jaina community diminished. The reasons for this change have never been examined in detail. In the Emmy Noether-Research Project, funded by the German Research Council (DFG), political changes as well as their immediate affect on religion and ritual, and on art and architecture, are for the first time studied together. Historically, the main questions concern the reasons for the loss of power, at least in certain areas of Karnataka, and the procedures employed to depose the Jainas. From a Religious Studies point of view, the influence this has had on the beliefs, the ritual and the self-understanding of the Jainas are of major concern. In the further development from the points of view of Art History and Architecture of certain Jaina pilgrimage centres, even after the decline in power on the one side, and the forcible conversion of Jaina into Hindu temples on the other, are being analysed and interpreted the light of the other two disciplines. Through a combination of results from the three different subject areas, this intriguing and so far widely neglected period in the history of south India is for the first time investigated in a more holistic and complete way, to explain the lasting importance of the Jaina community in Karnataka today. The results of the research project will be summarised in a comprehensive publication.



(Left) After a shower of purifying turmeric liquid, the grey stone of the monumental figure appears bright yellow. (Above) Different shades of red diluted sandalwood paste are poured over the venerated representation of Gommaṭeśvara. (Photos: Julia A. B. Hegewald)

As part of the project, a conference entitled “Jainism in Karnataka: Art, History, Literature and Religion” was held in cooperation with Professor S. Settar at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) in Bangalore in February 2007. The symposium brought together specialists in the history, literature, religion, art and architecture of Jainism in Karnataka. Delegates came from universities and research institutions from throughout India and engaged in stimulating debates. At this occasion, an exhibition of photographs and texts, documenting the Mahāmastakābhīṣeka 2006 at Śravaṇabelgoḷa, and also including pilgrims’ textiles were on view in Bangalore. This display was first presented at the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg, in Summer 2006.

Parts of the exhibition will be shown at the conference “Jainism and Modernity,” the Jaina Studies workshop at SOAS in March 2007. This year’s conference represents a European network initiative. It has been organised and co-funded by three specialists in Jaina studies, Dr Peter Flügel from SOAS, Dr Olle Qvarnström from the Religious Studies Department at the University of Lund, and Dr Julia Hegewald from the South Asia Institute at the University of Heidelberg. It is hoped that similar joint ventures will continue to build bridges between international scholars, further encourage research on Jainism, and continue the tradition of bringing academics and members of the Jaina community together for more fruitful exchanges in the future.

Julia A. B. Hegewald is head of the *Emmy Noether-Research Project on Jainism in Karnataka (DFG)* and teaches *South Asian History of Art and Architecture* at the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg, Germany.



Julia A.B. Hegewald

Donors who have participated in the ritual take home the metal water pots and sanctified coconuts as treasured objects.



Members of the team at the Mahāmastakābhīṣeka exhibition in Heidelberg, June 2006.

Jainism in Karnataka: History, Architecture and Religion

Alongside Hindus and Buddhists, the Jains represent one of the oldest religious groups in India. The numerically relatively small community of the Jains developed an entirely distinct culture (religion, art, architecture, philosophy) and looks back upon more than 2500 years of changing history. In the modern south Indian state of Karnataka, the Jains experienced a period of great political and cultural flourishing from the 5th to the early 12th century CE, a period during which many kings and their ministers were Jains. In the early 12th century, their influence allegedly came to a sudden end. The reasons for this abrupt and forceful change, however, have never been examined in detail.

In this interdisciplinary research project, political changes as well as their immediate affect on religion, art and architecture will for the first time be studied together. Historically, the main questions will concern the reasons for the sudden loss of power and the procedures employed to depose the Jains.

For more information please visit the website:

www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/abt/kunst/preview/index.php