

Pure Soul and the Jaina Traditions, Syntax and Experience

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From 14 April to 25 June 2023, the Centre of Jaina Studies and the Brunei Gallery at SOAS presented a unique exhibition. *Pure Soul: The Jaina Spiritual Traditions* was supported by the Kānjī Svāmī Society,¹ the Leverhulme Trust,² and SOAS, timed to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Centre of Jaina Studies.³ The aim was to inform a wider public about previously underrepresented facets of the Jaina way of life, in particular on the non-image venerating Śvetāmbara mendicant traditions, and lay traditions inspired by the spiritual teachings of the Digambara monk Kundakunda. Most of these traditions do not even feature in standard textbooks on Jainism, let alone exhibitions, though thirty to forty percent of Jains follow them today.

In museums and exhibitions, the Jaina tradition has generally been presented in stereotyped form. To some extent this is unavoidable. The spotlight is invariably on Mahāvīra, Jaina temples and art. More recently the “triple A-s” of modern Jaina ethics were added: *ahiṃsā* (non-injury), *anekāntavāda* (many-sidedness), and *aparigraha* (non-possession),⁴ values that inform sets of soteriological practices culminating in *sallekhanā*, the fast to death.⁵ In order to reach contemporary audiences, new conceptual bridges are constructed to global movements, such as peace, veganism, life-reform, and wellness.

The approach of the *Pure Soul* exhibition was different. For the first time, philosophical and social differences within the Jaina tradition were placed at centre stage, highlighting the internal pluralism of Jaina thought and practice, and the fact that there are distinct varieties of Jaina ethics. The premise was that in its processes of internal differentiation, the vitality and creativity of the Jaina tradition manifests itself. The vibrant internal philosophical debates contribute to the perpetuation of the tradition, and are to be celebrated.⁶

The recent focus on applied ethics pioneered by Jaina communities at the beginning of the 21st century contrasts with ‘object-centred’ representations of

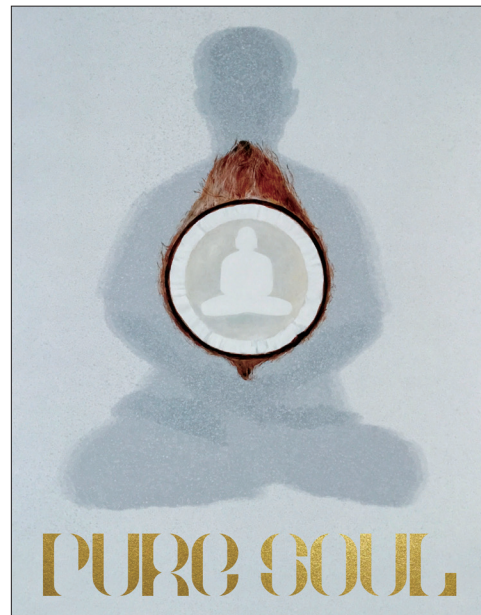


Figure 1. Exhibition Poster

the Jaina heritage in colonial style museums.⁷ These include the collections of the *Archaeological Survey of India*, and the first Jaina museums,⁸ which both feature assemblages of antiquities, generally sculptures and illustrated manuscripts, often of untraceable origins.

Thematic exhibitions on Jainism for international audiences were pioneered by cosmopolitan museums in Europe and the USA. A distinctive feature was their academic orientation, reflected in bespoke catalogues and companion volumes contributed by leading scholars. The first exhibition that was dedicated to the Jaina tradition was held at the Rietberg Museum, Zürich in 1974. Subsequently, eight similar exhibitions of varying scope and size, some of them travelling, were put on show, including three between 2020 and 2023, indicating a growing public awareness of and interest in the Jaina tradition.⁹ The majority of these exhibitions focused exclusively on Jaina art. In some cases, elements of Jaina religious culture were included by juxtaposing ancient religious art with depictions of modern ritual contexts.

The growing international presence and vital concerns of the Jaina diaspora were one of the factors responsible for the general shift of focus in Jaina Studies from texts and art to religion and

1 The Kānjī Svāmī Project: www.soas.ac.uk/research/kanji-swami-history-teachings-community

2 Leverhulme Major Research Grant MRF-2021-192.

3 The CoJS was founded in 2004 and hence the exhibition planned for 2024. At short notice, SOAS offered incentives for moving the exhibition to 2023, restricting preparation time to eight months.

4 *Anekāntavāda* seems to figure here primarily as an epistemic concept and as a placeholder or specification of the *satya* vow in the *mahāvratā* chain. A link to *ahiṃsā*, as in “intellectual *ahiṃsā*,” is only possible from a pan-*ahiṃsīc* perspective. The ethical principles of non-stealing (*asteya*) and chastity (*brahmacharya*) are generally neglected by “triple A” approaches to Jaina ethics.

5 The formula is now echoed by primers on world philosophy: “The path to liberation for Jains [...] consists of doing no harm (*ahiṃsa*), detachment (*aparigraha*), asceticism and acceptance of the fact that reality is infinitely complex and many-sided (*anekantavada*)” (Grayling 2019/2020: 532).

6 Julien 2016/2021: 53: “Cultural *divides* are deployments that open the way to new possibilities.”

7 Kuper 2023.

8 Community run museums on Jainism are a post-colonial innovation. See Flügel 2021: 216ff.

9 *Kunst und Religion in Indien: 2500 Jahre Jainismus*, Zürich 1974, etc.; *Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India*, Los Angeles, London 1994; *Steps to Liberation: 2500 Years of Jain Art and Religion*, Antwerp 2000; *Victorious Ones: Jain Images of Perfection*, New York 2009; *The Pursuit of Salvation: Jain Art from India*, New Orleans 2020; *Jain sein: Kunst und Kultur einer indischen Religion/Being Jain: Art and Culture of an Indian Religion*, Zürich 2022; *Pure Soul: The Jaina Spiritual Traditions*, London 2023.

philosophy. The new ‘lived religion’ frame adopted by many museums today is reactive. It encompasses both the older ‘Jaina art’ and the newer ‘engaged Jainism’ approaches. In retrospect, changes in museal representation can be read as a quasi-dialectical movement from museum presentations of ancient Jaina artifacts to self-presentations of modern Jaina values and practices, and to representations of ‘Jainism’ as a lived tradition engaged in self-other representation. A second result of the musealisation of lived tradition is legitimisation of innovations. Exhibitions are a vehicle for the historicization of (life) styles.

Pure Soul: The Jaina Spiritual Traditions addressed, for the first time in a public exhibition the internal pluralism of the Jaina tradition, that is, distinct strands of Jaina philosophy informing the still little-known patterns of differentiation of current Jaina schools and sects, which the exhibition mapped with the help of a team of researchers and curators, comprising both academics and community members, and collaborating institutions in India and the UK.¹⁰ The focus was on immaterial rather than material culture. The quest for liberation of the soul from the body and of self-realisation, at the heart of Jaina religiosity in all its variations, was emphasised, and different Jaina methods or ‘paths’ illustrated, including different attitudes to asceticism and forms of meditation. The core image used for the exhibition and companion volume, a painting by Manoj Sakale of 2018, titled *Pure Soul*, is based on a popular simile of Kāñjī Svāmī: ‘Similar to a coconut which is white and sweet within ... our soul is pure ... the whiteness and sweetness of a coconut’s flesh symbolises the soul’s purity and inner bliss respectively.’ (Figure 1)

¹⁰ A full list of the more than one hundred collaborators, and collaborating institutions is published in the companion volume of the exhibition. See Flügel, De Jonckere & Söhnen-Thieme 2023: 196.

The first panel of the exhibition set the scene in the following way:

The quest for the Pure Soul is the principal focus of the Jaina tradition. This Soul, *ātman* or *jīva*, is free from all the ties that keep a living being in this life and in a cycle of future lives. Instead, its essential nature is qualified by pure consciousness. The experience of the Self as different from the body is a key step on the path towards its salvation. Liberation, *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*, also involves the removal of existing karmic ties and the avoidance of new karma.

Liberation of the soul from perceived entanglement in the chains of karma is the principal aim of the Jaina tradition. How can the body-soul relationship be conceptualised? What methods of salvation exist? How can the soul be represented in a visual way? These questions have been answered by Jaina philosophers in different ways. To guide visitors to key differences between the main schools of interpretation, without using too many words, the curators created a series of contrasts using gateway objects offering visual clues to the oppositions structuring the exhibition space. Two transversal contrasts structured the exhibition: The non-image venerating Śvetāmbara Jaina traditions and the spiritual traditions of Kundakunda, Taraṇ Tāran Svāmī, Śrīmad Rājacandra and Kāñjī Svāmī were juxtaposed to the culturally dominant image-venerating traditions (Figure 2), and the dominant philosophical opposition in contemporary Jaina discourse cutting cross sectarian divisions. It concerns the question of whether karmic matter physically binds the soul and can only be removed through physical austerities, or whether the soul is merely associated with karman. In the latter case, salvation can be achieved by self-realisation through



Figure 2. Line drawing of Sādhumārgī Sthānakavāsī *sādhvī*, by Mansi Dhariwal

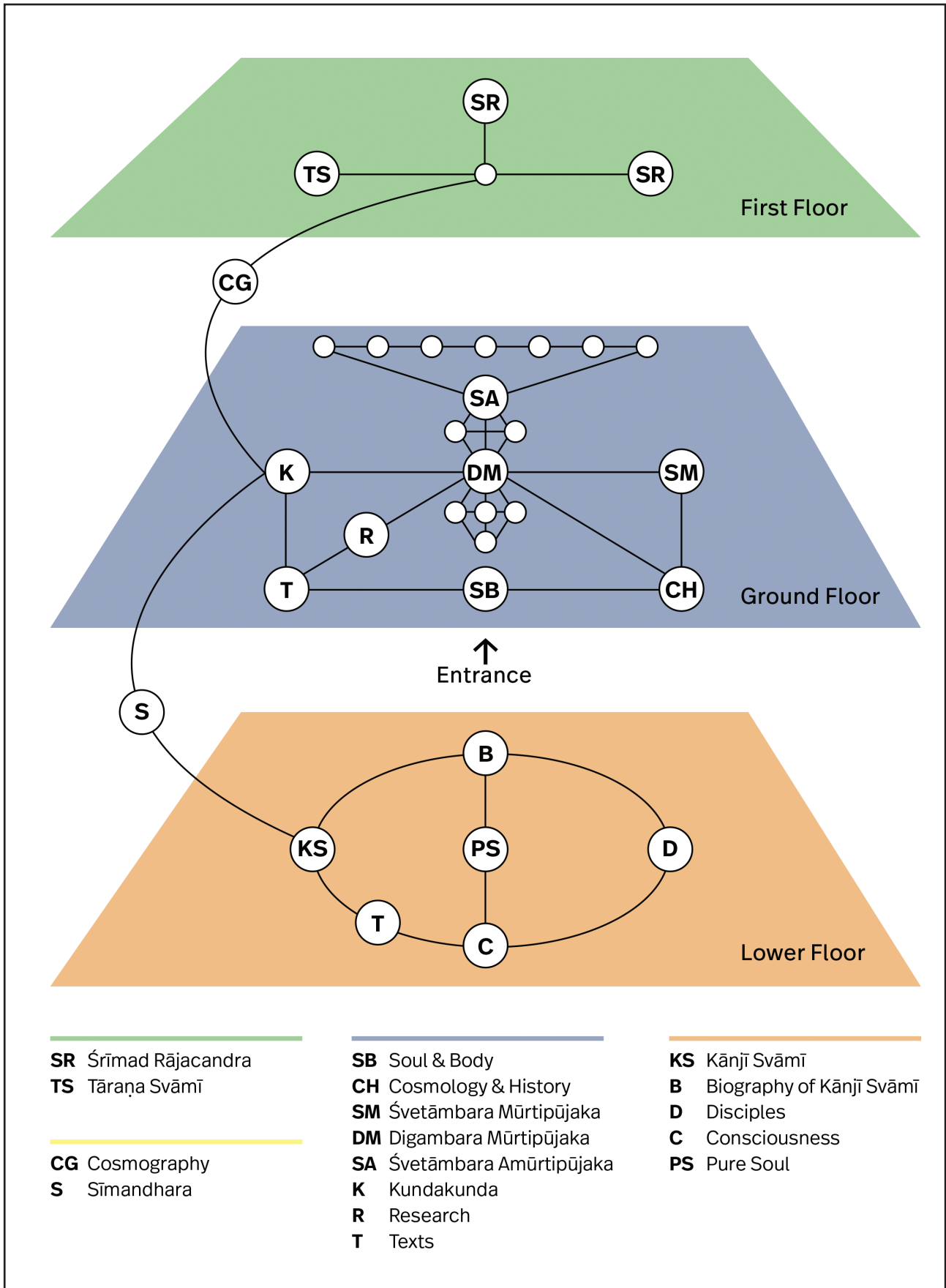


Figure 3. Space Syntax, Pure Soul Exhibition. Design: Roger Fawcett-Tang

meditative insight into the essential disconnection between soul and non-soul and the innate liberated state of the soul.¹¹ In *Pure Soul* the spectrum of views was effectively reduced to this analytical opposition, to serve both as an explanatory model of the structural dynamic generating the pattern of sectarian differentiation of the Jaina religious field today, and to orientate the arrangement of the exhibition. Historically, debates on this question affected the Digambara more than the Śvetāmbara tradition.

The overall structure of the exhibition, displayed on all the three floors of the Brunei Gallery, including the Japanese Garden, combined the chrono-thematic series of oppositions, such as body/soul, history/cosmology, lay/mendicant, male/female, *mūrtipūjaka/amūrtipūjaka*, and traditional/modern, with the method of juxtaposing distinct gateway objects. (Figure 3) The galleries at the beginning were dedicated to texts, metaphysics, cosmology,¹² and history of the living Jaina tradition, followed by displays dedicated to previously little-known aspects of the *mūrtipūjaka*, and *amūrtipūjaka* traditions, including complete sets of monastic paraphernalia. An imaginary painting of Kundakunda and a reproduction of his footprint image at Ponnur connected the Ground Floor portrayal of Jaina mendicant traditions with depictions of the predominantly Digambara lay traditions that teach variations of the spiritual path of self-realisation

11 Bhatt 1974, Johnson 1995.

12 Loans of manuscripts and the first printed Jaina texts and images came from the Royal Asiatic Society and the British Library and cosmographic paintings from the V&A and the Wellcome Collection..



Figure 5. *Siddha - The Supreme Soul*, by Ratan Shah.

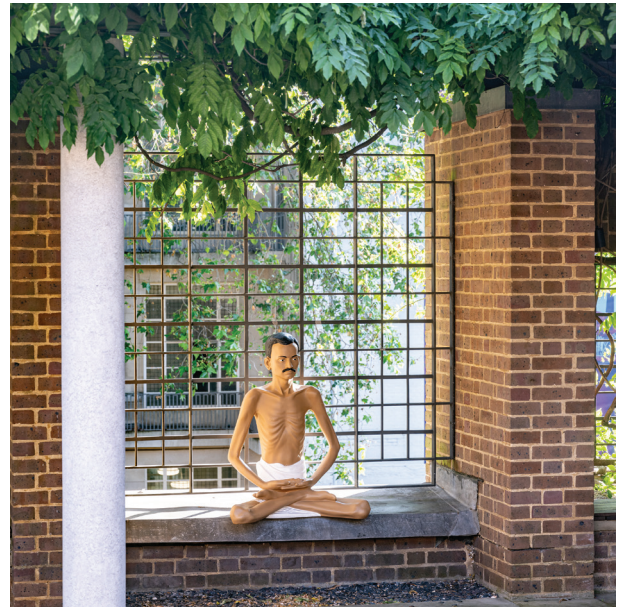


Figure 5. Śrīmad Rājacandra, SOAS Japanese Garden

inspired by Kundakunda to galleries on the First and Lower Ground Floors. The gateway objects of the First Floor, displayed next to information panels and maps, were a book shrine of the effectively aniconic Tāraṇa Tāraṇa Svāmī tradition, and a fibreglass sculpture of Śrīmad Rājacandra placed at the centre of the roof garden, both provided by communities in India. (Figure 4) The largest space of the exhibition, the Lower Ground Floor, was dedicated to the biography and teaching of Kānjī Svāmī and his disciples, and to related modern representations of the embodied, pure, and supreme soul or self.

It was clear from the outset that traditional and modern representations of the ‘pure soul’ functioning as gateway objects should be placed at the centre of the exhibition, supplemented by a statue of the Jina Pārśvanātha from the collection of the V&A (Figure 6), a life size line drawing of a Sthānakavāsī *sādhvī*, and sculptures of the lay gurus Śrīmad Rājacandra and Kānjī Svāmī. (Figure 7) Placement of traditional figurative and modern abstract *siddha* images at opposite ends of the exhibition was intended to create a sense of closure for the visitor whose journey, whichever way, through representations of key junctures of Jaina history was framed by sequences of overlapping binary oppositions, culminating in a space for the contemplation of the supreme soul philosophy.¹³ (Figures 5 and 8)

The exhibition drew in part from a 2015 exhibition in which artists had been commissioned to produce paintings and sculptures on aspects of the philosophy of Kānjī Svāmī and Kundakunda and of “Gurudeva” himself.¹⁴ This had been housed at a gallery built at Songadh, India where Kānjī Svāmī spent much of his life. While the originals were not made available for *Pure Soul*, reproductions were displayed. These could be viewed on the Lower Ground Floor gallery, which

13 Cf. Tzortzi & Hillier 2016.

14 *Gurudevshree Kanjiswami 125th Birth Anniversary Art & Sculpture Camp* 2014-2015. See Shah & Mehta 2015.



Figure 6. Pārśvanātha
Yalabargā, Karnataka c. late 13th-early 14th century
Schist stone
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

had an entirely different, modern aesthetic feel from the Ground Floor space, which depicted the traditional Jain mendicant traditions. This contrast was amplified by using two different soundscapes: on the Ground Floor, the universal *Arham Mantra*, and on the Lower Ground Floor tapes of selected lectures of Kānjī Svāmī who, like many mystics, never wrote anything.

Including reproductions of these contemporary artworks was an acknowledgement of little-known experiments in Jain religious art, which is often portrayed as a canon of repetitive forms. Notably, many of these modern works of art are not signed. Although not used in religious ceremonies, copies of some of the paintings are displayed in temple complexes, underscoring their intended function as art for inspirational use.

The exhibition and the frame programmes were all very well-attended. Thanks to a successful advertising campaign by members of the Bhagwan Mahavir Digambar Jain Temple at Harrow in London, about 10,000 visitors saw the exhibition, the majority from the Jain communities in the UK. The success of the show must also be attributed to the tireless efforts of a group of dedicated volunteers from the Jain community who explained the contents of the exhibition to interested visitors, who recorded their impressions in the visitors book. (Figure 9) The feedback in the visitors was overwhelmingly positive, but predominately devotional in spirit.

Thus, *Pure Soul: The Jain Spiritual Traditions* was unique in various respects. It was based on new, only partly published, research on history, doctrine and



Figure 7. Kānjī Svāmī sculpture from Digambar Jain Temple Harrow & Painting by Charan Sharma, 2018.



Figure 8. *Caitanyaghana* – The Conscious Soul, by Uttam Pacharne, 2018.

religious culture of the Jaina mendicant traditions, Kānjī Svāmī, Tāraṇa Svāmī and Rājacandra lay traditions, and the provenance of Jina images. While it exhibited works of art, it was not an art exhibition, nor was it orientated by an abstract notion of ‘Jainism’. Rather than reaffirming an artificial monolithic image of the Jaina tradition, it communicated a sense of its diversity and inspired visitors to want to know more about the fascinating philosophical deliberations within the Jaina tradition of which much can be learned and is yet to be recovered from the historical record.

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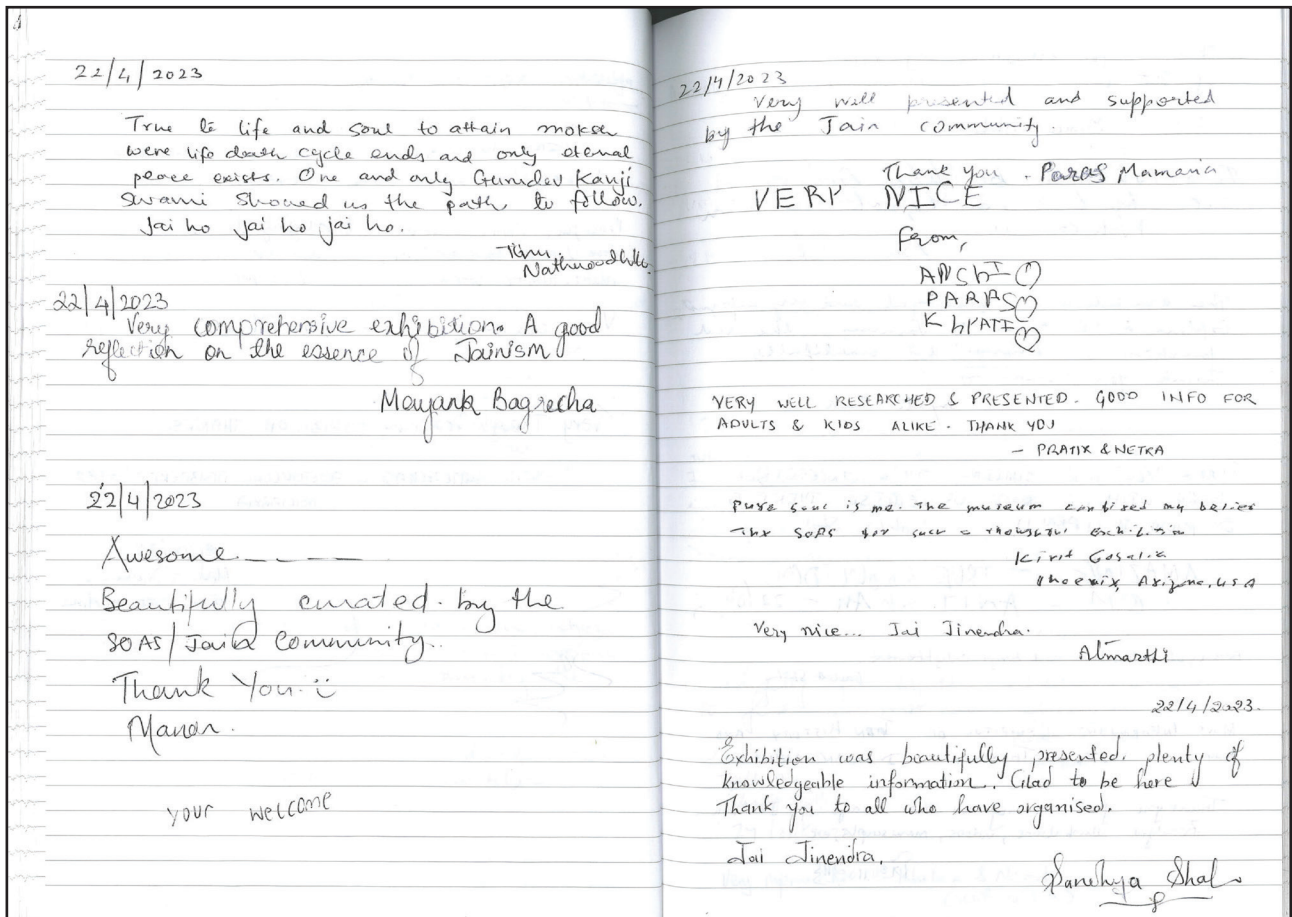


Figure 9. Visitor's Book Pages 3-4 of 100

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Kānjī Svāmī, sculpture
Courtesy of the Digambar Jain Temple, Harrow