

Vijñaptipatra : Painted Invitation to Ācārya

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Otherwise itinerant, Jaina Ācāryas, Munis and Sādhus spend four months of monsoon at one place. This is a common practice among the sādhus of Jaina as well as many Hindu sects. They are always on move rest of the year. It is an essential part of their code of conduct; reason being that if they stay permanently at a place they get attached to a place and its people. Moreover, they will be neglecting their primary duty of spreading the benefic spiritual and religious message.

During the monsoon season Śrāvakas also take more interest in religious activities and pursue the scriptural code of conduct more seriously. Commencing from 12th day of dark fortnight of Bhādrapada month, Śvetāmbara Jainas celebrate their most pious annual festival called *Paryūṣana-Parva*. The last day of this week long ceremony, falling on the fifth day of bright half of Bhādrapada month is called *Samvatsarī*. Sometimes it falls on the fourth or sixth day according to the Jaina astrological calendar. According to *Niśītha Chūrṇī*, a Jaina Āgama : "*Paryūṣana is an incomparable festival of adoration of restrain, celebrating self control and forgiveness. It is based on an event that took place in the 6th century B.C. during the time of Mahāvīra, the 24th Tīrthaṅkara.*"

The day following the *Samvatsarī* day is known as *kṣamāvāṇī* or the day of universal forgiveness. Jainas mutually seek and grant forgiveness from their friends, relatives and even acquaintances for any hurt caused during the past year, knowingly or unknowingly. The scope of this mutual forgiveness extends to all living beings. People also send forgiveness letters (*Kṣamāpana-Patra*) that are also known as *Vinati-Patra*. In Gujarat, these are popularly known as *Tippana*. The

importance of this day is evident in narratives from ancient texts. An important incident about forgiveness is from *Triśaṣṭiśalākā Puruṣa Caritra* by Hemacandrācārya. It states that Udayana, the king of Sindhu-Sauvira and a contemporary of Bhagavāna Mahāvīra, granted forgiveness to his brother-in-law, Canda Pradyota of Ujjayinī, a sworn enemy, on this day.

Muni Jinvijayajī has written that *caumāsā* has the same importance among the Jainas as Ramzān has for Muslims and Pateti for Pārasīs. There is a tradition in Jaina community that *Saṅghas*, *Śrāvakas* or societies invite *Ācāryas* to spend these monsoon days, popularly known as *Caumāsā*. These written invitations, known as *Vijñaptipatra*, used to be very elaborate and often illustrated. Besides these, *Saṅgha* and *śrāvakas*, ascetic disciples of *Ācāryas* (heads of religious groups) too wrote to their *Ācāryas*; but there is a little difference in style and subject; for example teachers are apprised with student's activities during *caumāsā* travel or sometimes their works composed in those days.

For writing invitation letter, good scholars and scribes (*lahiyā*) were engaged. In the earlier period these letters were simple and devoid of any visual embellishment; more attention was paid to the language and writing style. With passage of time floral borders and colourful auspicious motifs started appearing; first occasionally and then as a rule. In due course *Aṣṭa-maṅgala* (eight auspicious Jaina signs) were introduced. Next came paintings of fourteen dreams seen by Tīrthaṅkara's mother, before his birth. Study of Gujarati and Rajasthani styles of painting reveals that wealthy patrons from Jaina community supported this artistic and expensive venture, so liberally that by the end of the 19th century two-third part of a *Vijñaptipatra* was filled with paintings and only the remaining one third was used for writing the textual message.

At that time of writing the sequence and format of illustrations in a *Vijñaptipatra* was also decided. Generally the joy of people was shown in the beginning by composition of dancing and singing girls (Fig.1). This was followed by eight auspicious motifs, fourteen dreams seen by the mother of Tīrthaṅkara, birth of the Jina and his father's discussion with astrologers regarding the horoscope of his son. After these religious themes came the scenes of the town

(Fig.2) from where the letter is sent. This would include important places of worship (Jaina, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava temples as well as mosques) and water bodies (wells, tanks). Next came illustrations of the king and his palace or the king on horseback followed by the main market where prominent merchants are shown sitting in their shops (*gaddī*) (Fig.3) and artisans practicing their crafts in their workshops. This illustrated presentation of the city life also included activities on the road (Fig.4), for example *śobhā-yātrā* (religious procession). With Śrīpūjyajāī preaching his followers (Fig.5) ended the pictorial part and then came the humble text of the invitation letter with signature of inviters.



Fig.1 : A musician and dancer under a canopy (detail)
From the *Vijñaptipatra* from Banaras, Gouache on paper
c. mid-19th cent. (Courtesy: *Kalā* Vol.XI)

In absence of any textual information about the methodology of illustrating such letters, early authors on this topic, Muni Jinvijayajāī and Dr. Hiranand Shastri depended on available of *Vijñaptipatras* and related material to arrive at the traditional methodology, style and sequence of illustrations.

Muni Jinvijayajāī was the pioneer, who introduced this kind of epistolary literature (*patra-sāhitya*), to the scholarly world. He found fragment of a letter (13th century) among the heap of palm leaves in the *bhaṇḍāra* at Patan. He studied

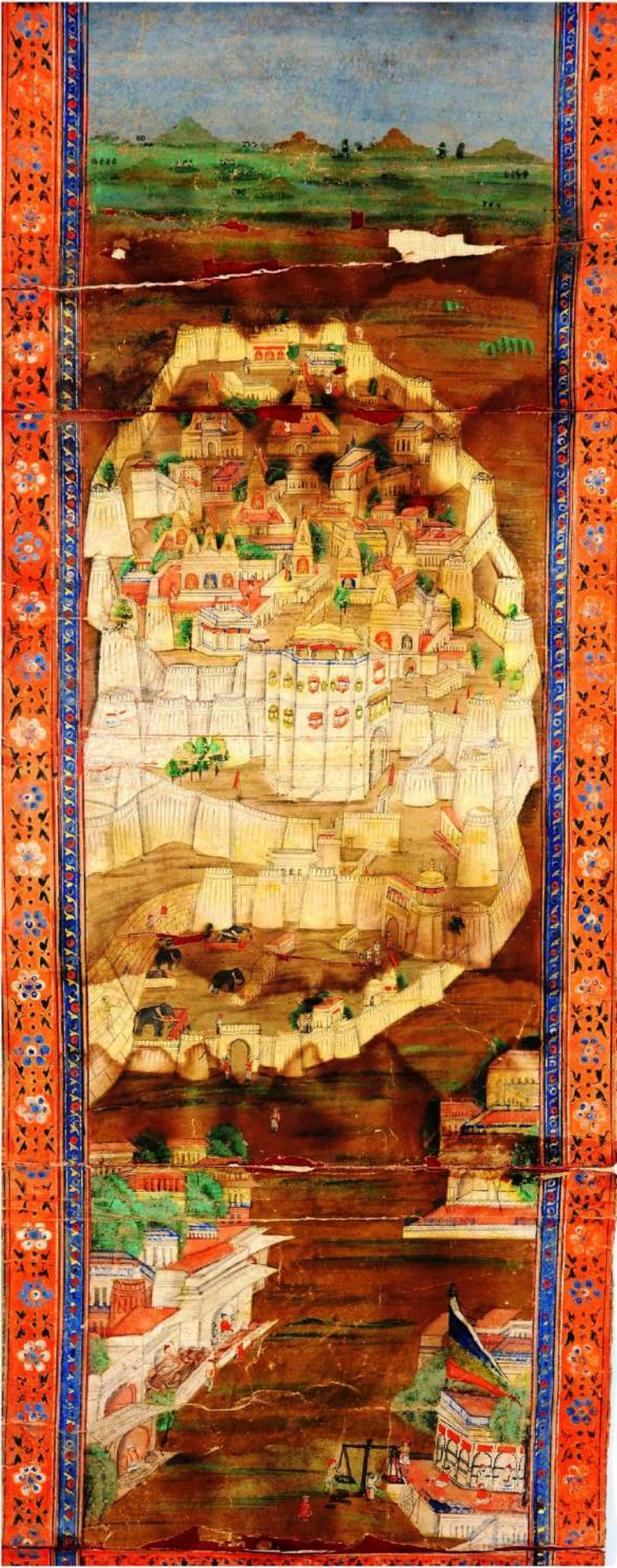


Fig.2 : Fortified town of Jaisalmer. From a letter sent from Jaisalmer 1916 VS (CE 1859), Coll. Oriental Institute, M.S. University, Baroda

that letter but could not make anything out of it except that before the arrival of paper, palm-leaf was used for letter-writing. The languages used were Sanskrit and Prakrit.

In 1915 he came across a hand written copy of *Vijñapti Trivenī* in the collection of Vadi Parshvanath temple, Patan. He found it very interesting and historically important work and so he edited this text with an idea of publishing in the year 1916, while he was in Baroda. This work was published in the same year by Jaina Ātmānand Sabhā (Bhavanagar) with the financial help from a devout lady, *śrāvikā* Bijalibāi, widow of Seth Motilal Gulab Chand.¹

There are three long letters in this collection that are independent compositions : (1) *Indu-dūta* written by Mahopādhyāya Śrī Vinaya Vijayjī, (2) *Megha-dūta Samasyā Lekha* by Śrī Megha Vijayajī and (3) *Cheto-dūta* composed by an unknown poet. Munijī has discussed their literary qualities in detail. In the informative preface of the book Munijī has also written about the antiquity and form

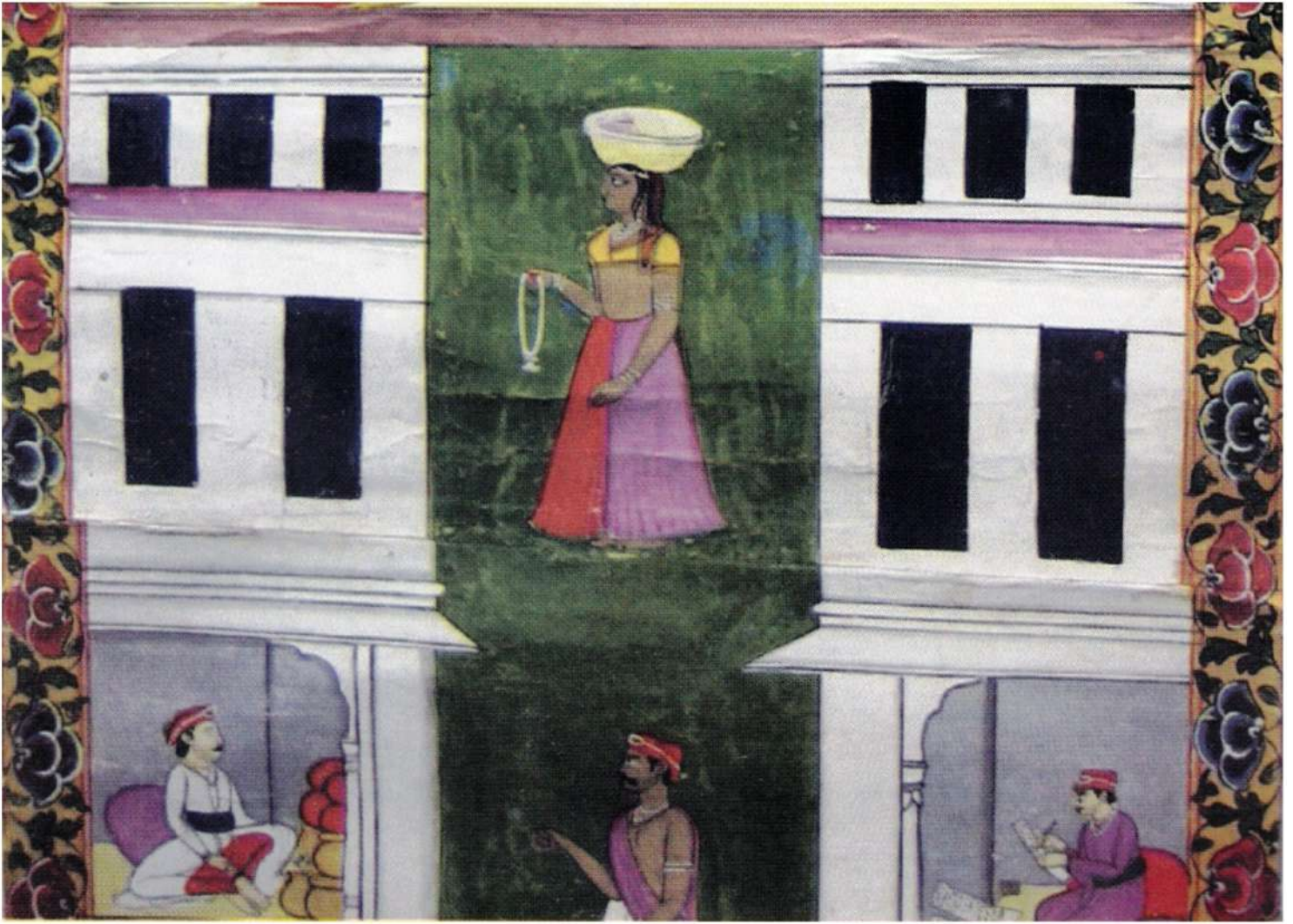


Fig.3 : The market scene, From the *Vijñaptipatra* from Banaras, Gouache on paper, c. mid-19th cent., 'A Rare Illustrated *Vijñaptipatra* from Banaras', Lalit Kumar, *Kalā* Vol.XI, 2004-05, pp. 67-72.

of such letters and some similar ones written by *śrāvakas* and *Nagara Seṭhas*. These letters fall in the other category in which ascetic disciples (*sādhus*) too wrote to their *Ācāryas* (religious group heads). However, there is a little difference in style and subject. For example, teachers are apprised of student's activities during *Caumāsā* (monsoon stay) movements or sometimes their literary works during those days.

Vijñapti Triveṇī was highly appreciated by the literary world of that period. Pt. Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, the erudite editor of Hindi journal *Sarasvatī* ascribed great value to it, and praised it as an extraordinary and incomparable work. It was the first edited work of Munijī. In his comprehensive preface of the book he wrote about the origin of *Vijñaptipatra*, its antiquity, its relation with *Paryūṣana* festival, its form and content of this genre of letters.

With the arrival of paper, Munis started taking keen interest in letter



Fig.4 : The city of Udaipur, *Vinati-Patra*, Udaipur, c.1800, Coll. Govt. Museum, Jodhpur (Acc. No. 2657)

writing and ornamenting the text with geometric and floral borders. Earlier only common auspicious motifs, like *kalaśa* or a flower vase, were painted but later on eight auspicious Jaina motifs, generally set in square composition, were added.²

Next addition was a set of fourteen dreams : elephant, bull, lion, goddess Lakṣmī, pair of garlands of Mandāra flowers, the moon with a deer, the radiant sun represented by a male head, banner, pitcher (*kalaśa*), a pond with lotuses, *milk-ocean*, Celestial Vehicle (*Deva-Vimāna*), heap of jewels and smokeless fire. Further additions were illustrations displaying religious places including temples and mosques, the ruler and the *Ācārya*. All this pictorial information made these illustrated letters not only comprehensive travel guides but also important historical documents.

In the history of illustrated *Vijñaptipatra* from 13th to 19th century, covering roughly six hundred years, a remarkable one is from Jaina *Saṅgha* of Agra prepared in 1610 and addressed to *Ācārya* Vijayasena Sūrī. It was painted by a Mughal artist Ustād Salivahan. It shows the court of Mughal Emperor Jahangir. At that time, on the request of Jaina



Fig.5 : Śripūjyaji, the preceptor, preaching. From a letter sent from Merta (Jodhpur), 19th cent
(Courtesy: Muni Suyas Chandra Vijayaji)

community, the Emperor had issued a grant prohibiting any kind of animal killing during the *Paryūṣana-parva*. It was a great occasion of rejoicing for the Jaina society and was accordingly recorded in this letter. This *Vijñaptipatra* was in the collection of Muni Hamsavijayī when it was first published by Muni Jinvijayajī in *Jaina Sāhitya Saṁśodhaka* (no.4, pp.212-217).

Later on N.C. Mehta referred to it in his book *Studies in Indian Painting*, Mumbai, 1926, pp.69-73. He writes, "I am indebted to Muni Jinvijayajī, the accomplished historian and scholar of the Gujarat Vidyapitha at Ahmedabad for permission to make use of pictorial document of exceptional interest, which was discovered by him in the collection of Muni Hamsavijay. The pictorial rolls about 13 feet long and about 13 inches broad and is in two pieces. The pictures are drawn by Ustād Salivahan of the court of Jahangir and it is definitely recorded that the historical incidents portrayed, are true to life, Salivahan himself seems to have been a pious man as he too has sent his humble greetings to the *Acharya* Vijayasen Suri who was then at Devapatan in Kathiawar..."

"The present letter is addressed by the Jains of Agra to the celebrated Jain scholar Muni Vijayasen Suri, the disciple and successor of Heervijaya Suri, who was given the title of 'Jagat Guru' 'the world preceptor', by the Emperor Akbar in about 1583.³ The letter is dated Kartik Sudi 2, Monday *Saṁvat* 1667-1610 A.D. and is written in Gujarati with a considerable and admixture of the then current Hindi..... (p.70)."

Dr. Hiranand Shastri published it (1936) in Gaikwad Oriental Series no.1.⁴ Six years later, in 1942, this letter appeared in *Ancient Vijñaptipatras*, at the time of coronation of Pratap Singh, Maharaja of Baroda, where this letter was published along with the English translation.⁵ After many years the letter came to the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay for conservation. There it came to the notice of Prof. Pramod Chandra and he requested *Munishri* for his kind permission to study and publish it. He wrote an extensive article on it, which came out in *Lalita Kalā*, no.8, where he also introduced other works of Ustād Salivahan.⁶

Approximately at the same time, a collection of *Vijñaptipatras* was published in Singhi Jaina Series, Calcutta.⁷ It was edited by Muni Jinvijayajī and contained 27 letters written in Sanskrit. These *Vijñaptipatras* are full of historical, cultural and literary information that can prove to be important source of medieval Indian history. Being in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Gujarati (*Deśī*), they should be translated either in Hindi or English, to reach a wider group of readers.

Twenty-first century being the ninth birth centenary of Sri Hema Chandracharya, Kalikal Sarvajna, Sri Hema Chandracharya Smriti Sanskar Sikshan Nidhi decided to publish special editions of their journal *Anusandhāna* on *Vijñaptipatras*. A number of issues of this journal have already been published. Text of these letters are in their original form - Sanskrit, Bhasha (old Hindi), Gujarati and Marwari but the script is standard *Devanāgarī* for the complete text. This has been done in order to facilitate reading by all Hindi knowing readers.

These letters should be studied properly from different angles, specially from linguistics, history and styles of painting prevalent in Gujarat and Rajasthan during the specific period. For this purpose it would be best to constitute a committee comprising scholars working in these areas and deliberation organized. Discussions among participants will present an overall view of the subject -epistolary literature (*patra-sāhitya*) and languages and literature used in these letters. Letters were written by itinerant Jaina ascetics (*Sādhus*) who acquired usages, proverbs and expressions of different dialects and languages from the people living in the regions where they moved about to preach. As such their *bolī* (dialect) came to be known as *Sādhukkadi* in medieval northern India.

In the oral literature that came down to writing through these *Vijñaptipatras* a new genre, called *gazal*, developed in old Hindi. It was popularly used by *yatis* or non-itinerant *Sādhus*. Authors had to be also familiar with the history, arts and crafts of the town, in order to write about the land and people of the region. This was necessary because they had to give a detailed description of the king, merchants, places of worship, markets, *upāśryas* (ascetic-hostels) where the inviter *Ācārya* lived. They also had to know about the place where the invitee *Ācārya* was presently staying. The composer/writer usually a *yati* was supposed to know

about the geographical facts and also the history of the area. The composition, though called *gazal* a name adopted from Urdu literature was usually based on a local melody (*rāga*) or a regional folk song.

Being itinerant *Sādhus* are always on move from one place to other. They visited monuments, temples and other religious places. They also frequently interacted with people who told them about various incidents as well as regional anecdotes. This was a great source of knowledge, not only for them but also for their disciples. In other words they were great carriers of the oral tradition. For example Mahopādhyāya Śrī Megha Vijay writes in *Megha-dūta Samasyā Lekha* that there is a mountain called Ellora, about 8-9 miles from Daulatabad which has become famous for its cave temples.

These abodes of gods and their carved figures are rare examples in history. There are 34-35 caves extended in about one and a quarter mile. Out of them 12 are Buddhist, 17 Hindu (Brahmanical) and 5 are dedicated to Jaina pantheon. There are magnificent/massive Jaina sculptures showing seated Jīnas in *padmāsana* and *kāyotsarga* posture. Megha Vijayopādhyāya asks his messenger to pay respect to Pārśvanātha seated in the Jaina temple of Ellora Pahar near Devagiri. Then the writer suggests to his cloud messenger that, 'after crossing hills and towers he would reach the mountain Anki-tanki and there, even if he is in a hurry, should stay there for sometime as it is a sacred place and Bhagavān Pārśvanātha stayed there in old times.'¹⁸

There is another letter written on the 10th day of bright fortnight of month Māgha from a place called Malik Vāhana in Sindh by Śrī Jayasagara Upadhyaya to Ācārya Śrī Jinbhadra Sūri of Kharatara *gaccha* who was residing at Anhilpur Patan (Gujarat). Written in lucid language the letter informs about Jaina temples of Nagarkot (Kangra), among which a temple dedicated to Ādinātha, the first Tīrathāṅkara is worth mentioning.

Painting: Auspicious motifs - a flower, *svastika*, *kalaśa* or 'Śrī' written in decorative style appear on early *Vijñaptipatra* written on paper. But inclusion of painting in standard style developed gradually. In the absence of any dated letter it is hard to

say when it started. But writing 'Śrī' is a part of Indian tradition, which must have come with the beginning of letter writing. It is followed by a group of eight auspicious motifs (*aṣṭa-maṅgala*).

There was a pattern of painting then that depended on the *saṅgha* and the place of painting. The economic condition of the sponsoring authority, which is Jaina *saṅgha*, played a major role in the selection of a painter, writer and scribe. The usual practice is that the Jaina *saṅgha* selects a local painter. There is no recorded tradition for painting or planning a letter, Muni Jinvijayajī and Dr. Hiranand Shastri have discussed it in their works on the basis of available material.

Summarizing the interesting journey of *Vijñaptipatras*, which continued for about six hundred years from 13th to 19th century, it is evident that its base, medium and subject changed from time to time. It started with palm-leaf and cotton fabric; then came paper that provided smooth surface as well as enough space and size for painting. In the same way earth and stone colours, red, yellow and black with limited shades were followed by mixed shades. Technical development also brought changes in subject matter and patterns. In 1941 Dr. Hiranand Shastri remarked, "These *Vijñaptipatras* were mostly sent by Shwetambaras or rather the members of the Shripujya sect as we have seen above. The latest of these epistles is dated V.S. 1916 and is only eighty two years old. It is not impossible that the custom of sending elaborate *Vijñaptipatras* might have continued a few years longer. But it seems to have been discontinued now. At present simple but respectful letter seems to fulfill the need."⁹

Writing about the importance of *Vijñaptipatras* in the field of history, Dr. Shastri observed, "As is clear from these specimens *Vijñaptipatras* are, apart from the material they furnish for the study of local history or of the ethnography of the tracts from which they came, are a storehouse of important material for the linguistic study of the dialects in which they are written."¹⁰

References & Notes

1. Muni Jinvijaya (ed.) *Vijñapti Triveṇī*, Jain Atmanand Sabha, Bhavnagar, 1916.
2. *Svastika (Sothiya), Śrī Vatsa (Sirivaccha), Nandyāvarta (Nandiyāvatta), Vardhmānaka (Vadhamānaka), Bhadrāsana (Bhaddāsana), Kalaśa (Kalasa), a pair of fish (Matsyayugala), Mirror (Dappaṇa)*.
3. Ghose and Nahar's volume on Jainism (1917) for an English translation of the Firman - Charter of the right granted to Heervijaya Suri by Emperor Akbar in 1592 CE (Appendix B).
4. Indian Pictorial Art as developed in book Illustrations, Plates XVIII and IX.
5. Dr. Hiranand Shastri, *Ancient Vijñaptipatras*, memoir no.1, Sri Pratap Singh Maharaja Rajyabhiseka Granthamala, Baroda State Press, 1972, pp.28-30.
6. Pramod Chandra, 'Ustad Salivahan and the Development of Popular Mughal Art', *Lalit Kalā*, no.8, pp.25-46, Plates VI-IX.
7. *Vijñapati Lekh Saṅgraha* (ed. Acharya Jinvijaya Muni), no.51, Singhi Jaina Series, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 1960.
8. *Vijñapti Triveṇī*, (ed.) Muni Jinvijayaji, 1916, p.21.
9. Dr. Hiranand Shastri, 1942, p.66.
10. *Ibid.*, p.66-67.