



Fig. 1. Interior of Ranakpur Jain Temple. Image by Antoine Taveneaux.

MY FAVOURITE TEMPLE: THE JAIN TEMPLE OF RANAKPUR*

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In the middle of the 15th century, the largest Jain temple was built in Ranakpur, one of the five sacred sites of this religion, which is contemporary to Buddhism. Located in Rajasthan, on the road leading from Jodhpur, the blue city, to Udaipur, the lake city, it appears at the top of a hill, a dazzling white building, all in marble. If I want to be accurate, and repetitive: with its multiple domes, vaults and towers, it is a construction whose dimensions span between 60 to 63 square meters. The temple has four façades, and it symbolises a conquest over the four cardinal points, or in truth the entirety of the cosmos! Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!

Ranakpur owes its name to Rana Kumbha, who gave a large extension of land to the wealthy merchant Dharna Sah for the construction of the temples. Local tales mention that he had dreamed of a celestial place, and he entrusted its design to numerous architects who came from various regions in India. A sculptor named Depa was the one who clearly understood the vision, and he initiated the construction of the temples, which lasted for 50 years.

The Jainists profess non-violence and respect for all living creatures. They follow ascetic practices to allow their soul to defeat its internal enemies, and reach communion with divinity; this state is called Jina. Jainism has maintained itself through a lineage of 24 Tirthankaras or ascetic leaders. They have maintained

their religion, and although they constitute less than 1% of the totality of believers in India, they have influenced political, ethical and economic issues in a decisive manner. They have also migrated, and now sustain communities in various parts of the world, including in the United States, in the Far East, in Western Europe and in Australia.

Large windows decorate the sanctuary, letting in the filtered light through its intricate lacework, and illuminating the 1444 different columns, a forest of marble, which brings to my mind the Mosque in Córdoba. Beautiful sculpted details, both in the ceilings and niches housing statues, with their classical bent waists and hips characteristic of Indian sculpture, give all bodies a distinctive erotic aspect: Kurajaho, for example, the giant sculptures of Elephanta or those from temples in the South (Hampi, Belur, Halibid), as if the stone was about to dance or make love.

The statues' bodies enhanced with gold and their eyes with black stare with a strange intensity those who contemplate them. Immense eyes in sculpted faces, as luminous as those of Indians in real life: identical to the eyes of the devotees visiting the temple along with tourists.

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