

Honorable Ministers, Members, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Jay Jinendra

As many of you already know, British institutions hold a remarkably large number of Jain manuscripts. Over the past three decades, considerable efforts have been made not only to make these collections better known to scholars, but also to raise awareness within the Jain community itself, whose members, over centuries, created and preserved this extraordinary heritage.

Libraries and museums, working closely with the Institute of Jainology, have supported important initiatives such as the preparation of catalogues and the preservation of manuscripts. Open access has also been provided through the JAINpedia website, where one can discover a number of treasures, including illustrated manuscripts from the British Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Wellcome Collection.

The Wellcome Collection is especially significant. Preliminary cataloguing work undertaken by Dr. Kanubhai V. Sheth, Dr. Kalpana K. Sheth, and Professor Dinanath Sharma identified roughly 2,000 items of varying size and condition. Some consist of only one or two folios, while others are substantial manuscripts.

What is particularly striking about this collection is its diversity. Many works concern Jain canonical scriptures, doctrine, ethics, and philosophy. Yet the collection also contains important texts on medicine, astronomy, and astrology. Indeed, throughout history, no field of intellectual enquiry remained foreign to the Jain tradition. While early canonical texts may caution monks against practices such as divination, such prescriptions were not always interpreted literally. Rather, they were intended to prevent unprepared individuals from misusing specialised knowledge. Medieval and early modern history clearly shows that several high-ranking Jain Śvetāmbara *sūris* made major contributions to the sciences, particularly astronomy and mathematics. One notable example is Mahendrasūri, an astronomer at the court of Sultan Firuz Shah Tughlaq during the second half of the fourteenth century. Drawing upon Arabic and Persian sources, he introduced knowledge of the astrolabe into Sanskrit intellectual circles. In 1370, he composed a treatise on what he called the *yantrarāja*, the “king of astronomical instruments.” Twelve years later, his disciple Malayendusūri wrote an extensive commentary on this work. Copies of these

important texts are preserved in the Wellcome Collection. They represent a crucial moment in the transmission of scientific knowledge across linguistic, cultural, and religious boundaries, and they demonstrate the important role played by Jain scholars as intellectual mediators. The collection also contains several *janmapatrikās*, or horoscopes, as well as works on astrology, palmistry, and related subjects — materials that certainly deserve further scholarly exploration.

Allow me now to briefly highlight a few particularly remarkable illustrated manuscripts from the collection. You can visit the JAINpedia website and will see them there.

1) First, among the *Kalpasūtra* manuscripts, two copies stand out, especially manuscript Gamma 453. This manuscript is distinguished by its extraordinary artistic refinement. The text is written in gold ink against alternating red, blue, and black backgrounds, framed by elegant geometric borders. The illustrations are vivid and remarkably varied, depicting not only familiar scenes but also less commonly represented episodes from the life of Mahāvīra — including scenes from his childhood, depictions of ascetic trials, mendicant discipline, forgiveness, and the role of nuns. Equally fascinating is the detailed Sanskrit colophon at the end of the manuscript. It records the patronage of several generations of a wealthy and influential Oswal family from early sixteenth-century western India. Particularly noteworthy is the prominent role accorded to a female patron who directly sponsored the manuscript's production. Such colophons are invaluable historical sources, offering insight into social networks, religious patronage, and community leadership among the Jains of medieval Rajasthan and Gujarat.

2) A second noteworthy manuscript is an illustrated Prakrit version of the story of Kālakācārya, the famous Jain teacher associated with the establishment of the date of Paryushan. The manuscript contains rich and expressive paintings that vividly bring the narrative to life.

3) Third, I would like to mention the story of Yaśodhara, a narrative deeply cherished within the Jain tradition for its profound illustration of non-violence and karmic consequence through cycles of rebirth. The Wellcome manuscript is especially valuable because it preserves a unique, unpublished Apabhraṃśa version composed by the prolific fifteenth-century Digambara author Raīdhū of Gwalior. The paintings are charming, lively, and refreshingly informal in style.

4) The collection also includes an important example of the *Adhaidvīpa* genre of painted cloth cosmological diagrams, probably dating from the early nineteenth century.

5) Finally, one particularly striking folio depicts a large, moustached figure gazing directly at the viewer. The body is annotated with references to chakras, organs, and veins, while the accompanying text catalogues the karmic consequences of acts such as murder, theft, and forbidden sexual conduct. According to the colophon, this intriguing *yantra* was created by Pandit Padmavijaya during the rainy season retreat in Bikaner in 1638 CE.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The repatriation of cultural heritage to the communities to which it originally belonged is a complex undertaking requiring careful negotiation, organization, and international cooperation. In the field of Indology, such initiatives are still relatively new. I would like to mention one recent and encouraging example. Only three weeks ago, eight hundred rare documents relating to the history and culture of Nepal — documents that had been taken to Heidelberg University for restoration and digitisation — were formally returned to the Government of Nepal. Importantly, the collection remains accessible online, and an open-access catalogue will soon be released. This represents, in many ways, an exemplary model.

Today, we are about to witness another important step in this direction through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding that will define future stages of cooperation for the sake of the best preservation and use of a Jain manuscript collection. And once again, the Institute of Jainology has played an instrumental role in making this possible.

All parties involved in this process, the Wellcome Trust and Birmingham University, should be heartily congratulated for the innovative step they have taken for preservation and development of research.

Thank you for your kind attention!

Nalini Balbir
Mahavir Janma Kalyanak Celebration,
House of Commons,
Thursday 14 May 2026.