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The Jataka Story In Ajanta With Respect To Secret Stories Behind Its Paintings

Dr. Rohit Kumar Tripathi

Assistant Professor. Department of Ancient History Archaeology & Culture, Vindhyavasini Mahavidyalaya, Mirzapur, Affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith, Varanasi.UP.

Corresponding Author - Dr. Rohit Kumar Tripathi

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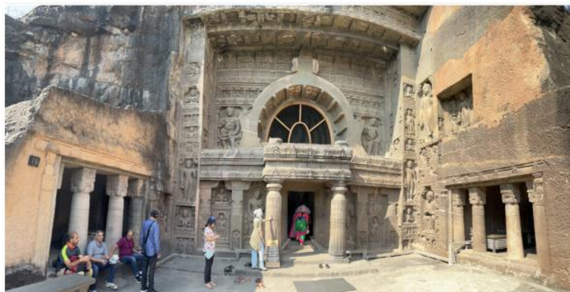
Abstract:

As per Dictionary the past is another country, as the adage goes, few historical sites typify it as profoundly as the Ajanta Caves in present-day Maharashtra. Not only do the caves signify a high point in the so-called "Golden Age" of India's cultural history, they also mark the point where a long-established form of economy—international trade—and a form of governance—large empires—were giving way to agricultural economies governed by regional, feudal chieftains. Ajanta tells the story of the remarkable efflorescence and sudden demise of the Vakataka empire, but also of the zenith of Buddhism as a state religion in India. It seems wrong, somehow, to call the grand Buddhist edifices of Ajanta "caves". Read any book on ancient Indian history and you will come across discussions about the great wealth of "rock cut caves" the country has. If you knew nothing of this, you might expect some rough-hewn network of caverns, poorly lit, dank, water dripping through years of collected moss.



Tourists outside the entrance to Ajanta's cave 19.

Introduction:

A Slow Reveal:

To visit Ajanta is to enjoy the art of the slow reveal. If you are coming from Aurangabad, the road first descends from a plateau into a valley. You get off your cab or bus at the entrance to the World Heritage Site and make your way to the shuttle bus service. Ajanta was "discovered" by a British hunting party in 1819 but it is clear from their accounts that the caves were fairly well known to local villagers at the time. It was a mystery to everyone concerned, though. After a century and a half of scholarship, we know a lot more, though this has made Ajanta an even greater enigma. Here's a quick historical primer: Although the number of caves open to the public run in an orderly number from 1-26 (1 being closest to the entrance and 26 the furthest), this doesn't reflect the actual chronological age of the caves. The first caves had been excavated around the first century BCE-first century CE, when the area was part of the large

Satavahana empire. These caves (numbers 9-12, except 11), right in the middle of the complex, are fairly humble *viharas*, with the main devotional focus served by the apsidal *chaitya-grihas* of caves 9 and 10, both of which feature some of the oldest paintings at the site. based on dedicatory inscriptions, that the oldest caves were patronised by local Buddhist communities, which included monks and wealthy merchants. This is also true of the oldest Buddhist rock-cut cave in Aurangabad, 100km south of Ajanta. The donors were beneficiaries of the extremely lucrative Mediterranean trade passing through the ancient port cities of Kalyan and Sopara on the Konkan coast. There also existed a thriving northern overland route, passing from the Ajanta area, through Ujjain in present-day Madhya Pradesh, and on to the dominions of the Kushana empire in the north. "Ujjain was heavily involved in east-west trade and was at the nexus of trade itineraries radiating in all directions: westward to the Gujarat ports, eastward to centres in the Narmada valley, to the north towards the Gangetic plain via Vidisha, to Rajasthan and farther northwest to the city of Taxila in ancient Gandhara (Pakistan)," writes art historian Pia Brancaccio in her book, *The Buddhist Caves Of Aurangabad: Transformations In Art And Religion* (2010). There was, however, a long hiatus in new caves being excavated in either Ajanta or Aurangabad between the first-fifth centuries CE. Scholars have theorised that this might be due to the bulk of the Indian Ocean trade migrating further south down the Konkan coast, and the interior Deccan region becoming increasingly reliant on local agriculture, which didn't generate the kind of income that could support lavish rock-cut structures.

Buddhist monks from India and Vietnam in front of the chaitya shrine in Ajanta's cave 19.

Discussion:

As per The Six-Tusked Elephant, An Attempt at a Chronological Classification of the Various Versions of the Shaḍdanta-Jātaka, in: *Beginnings of Buddhist Art and Other Essays*, London 1918, p. 185–204. This was to change in the fifth century, with a branch of the Vakataka empire, with its capital in Vatsalguma (present-day Washim in Maharashtra) coming to control much of the area from the Konkan coast to the western part of the Deccan plateau through a careful network of local feudatory kings. By the late fifth century, during the reign of the most illustrious emperor of the dynasty, Harisena, the Vakatakas had regained control of the old oceanic and overland trade routes and the economic conditions were in place for new, more lavish Buddhist building work to begin. As per Gokhale, Shobhana. 1991. *Kanheri Inscriptions* (Pune: Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute). It's these later caves from the reign of Harisena—1-

8, 11 and 14-31 (these clusters hold the bulk of the surviving painted murals as well) that tell the most compelling story of Ajanta. Unlike the older ones, these caves are clearly of royal commission: by Harisena himself, as well as by his minister Varahadeva, and Upendragupta, the feudatory king of the Ajanta area.

A painted mural scene from the 'Mahajanaka Jataka' in Ajanta's cave 1, showing King Janaka and his wife Sivali.

An Emperor's Playground:

The first cave you encounter when you enter the Ajanta complex, cave 1 (a vihara with a Buddha shrine), is also one of the most magnificent because it is the only cave that was built as a donation by Harisena. There is no direct inscription to support this claim. However, the late art historian Walter Spink, in his magisterial seven-volume study of the caves, Ajanta: History And Development (2005-17), deduces with almost forensic detail why it must have been a direct commission from Harisena. The Vakatakas were Saivite kings and Harisena was no different. But there was an old, large and prosperous Buddhist community in the region and international trade contacts would only have been enhanced with the patronage of Buddhism, the international religion par excellence. It is no wonder, then, that the sumptuously painted murals of cave 1 are all about kingship and the courtly life of royal cities. But this isn't what standard guidebooks on Ajanta will tell you. According to the mainstream narrative, the cave shrine is just a sacred space where the walls are illustrated with scenes from various Jataka tales. What enriches our understanding of the deeper symbolism of these masterpieces is the fact that nearly all the scenes from the Jatakas painted here show just the courtly life of its subjects. Of the four tales depicted here, take, for instance, the Mahajanaka Jataka. It tells the story of Prince Janaka of Mithila, who enounces his kingdom to become an ascetic in the Himalaya. The tale strongly mirrors the renunciation of Siddhartha, the historical Buddha. In the Ajanta murals, we see five main scenes from this Jataka. The first one is of Janaka, along with his entourage, listening to the teaching of a Bodhisattva. The second is of Janaka announcing his decision to renounce worldly life. The third is of his wife, Sivali, trying to divert his attention by putting on lavish performances of music and dance. The fourth is of Janaka undergoing a ritual abhisheka bath before he becomes an ascetic; the fifth panel shows him riding out of the city on his horse, again surrounded by an entourage. In the dense depiction of these scenes, the artists of Ajanta portray Buddhist themes but focus on the courtly rituals of a king, befitting that of Harisena's stature, who at the time was one of the most powerful monarchs in Asia, possibly even the world. The portrayal of Janaka's gorgeous palace, the depiction of the women dancers and

musicians, the animated, naturalistic and evocative expressions and poses of the prince, his wife and their entourages, the elaborate finery of the clothes, of Janaka's throne, his ritual bath: All these make the case that what we are seeing is a snapshot of the Vakataka court. After all, a painter would probably draw from experience, even while depicting mythical tales. Other mural depictions (from other Jataka tales) of royal hunts, languorous couples in ornate palaces, elaborately ordered gardens, wine drinking and other pursuits of royal prerogative make it very clear that the audience of these artworks was to be the emperor and his courtiers.

Methods and Aim:

This mixing of the kingly and the divine is also evident in the two celebrated paintings of Bodhisattvas flanking the main colossal Buddha sculpture of the shrine in cave 1. The dark-skinned Vajrapani to the Buddha's left and the light skinned Avalokiteshwara to the Buddha's right are understandably considered two masterpieces of the ancient world. But what makes them even more fascinating is that they are probably idealised depictions of real people. Spink is of the opinion that each of the two Bodhisattvas represent different painting traditions of the time: the Vajrapani with a southern, "pre-Chalukya" tradition and the Avalokishwara with a northern, "Gupta idiom". "…the wonderful jewels—the necklaces, the intentionally mismatched earrings, and Vajrapani's crown containing its three miniature thrones—must have been modeled on those worn by Harisena and his Vakataka courtiers in the great cities of the empire. The painters did not make these things up; they painted what they knew," writes Spink.

That Harisena's reign was politically, economically and culturally an international one, is amply depicted in the murals of cave 1 (as well as other caves). Brancaccio points out that in the Mahajanaka Jataka scene where Janaka is listening to the Bodhisattva, Central Asian characters have been depicted in his entourage. In the abhisheka scene, one of the attendants could well be east African. "Foreign figures appear so commonly in the murals that they must surely have been part of the social scene at the time," she writes. Such characters and scenes appear in cave after cave, such as a depiction of two Central Asian men drinking wine in cave 2 or ancient Sogdians appearing in a depiction of the Buddha's descent from Trayatrimsa heaven in cave 17, to name just two instances. This international presence is hardly surprising, given the extent of trade with Central Asia and the Mediterranean regions. Western Indian exports—especially of precious stones from ancient Lata (modern southern Gujarat) and cotton from western Deccan, both areas that Harisena controlled—to the Byzantine and Sassanian empires around this time are well documented. From the earliest depictions of the Buddha, whether in aniconic or iconic form, he has been cast as a universal monarch, a chakravartin who rules over the entire Universe. In such a depiction, the symbolism and accoutrements associated with real-world monarchs—like the

ceremonial umbrella or attendants with fly whisks—were commonly used. From the time of the Indo-Greek kingdoms, and especially the Kushana empire, another symbol, borrowed from Greek art, was added, that of the crown. As art historian Claudine Bautze-Picron shows in her book, The Bejewelled Buddha: From India To Burma (2010), this first took the form of Greek winged cherubs holding laurel wreath-style crowns over the Buddha's head. In the art traditions of Gandhara and Mathura, this soon transformed into that of celestial beings (vidyadharas) holding a high crown over the Buddha. Over the centuries, this became a part of the iconographic vocabulary, soon travelling to the Deccan through overland trade routes. In Harisena's world, the Buddha's depiction as the celestial monarch became shorthand for the temporal overlordship of the Vakataka emperor. In the sculptural tradition of Ajanta, the colossal Buddhas at the heart of every shrine-sanctuary sat enthroned in a manner that easily echoes a king seated among his courtiers, attended to by Bodhisattvas, vidyadharas, yakshas and na gas.

Nature and Technique:

Mural painting is inherently different from all other forms of pictorial art in that it is organically connected with architecture. The use of colour, design, and thematic treatment can radically alter the sensation of spatial proportions of the building. In this sense, mural is the only form of painting that is truly three-dimensional, since it modifies and partakes of a given space. Byzantine mosaic decoration evinced the greatest respect for organic architectural form. The great artists of the Renaissance, on the other hand, attempted to create an illusionistic feeling for space, and the masters of the subsequent Baroque period obtained such radical effects as to seem to dissolve almost entirely the walls or ceilings. Apart from its organic relation to architecture, a second characteristic of mural painting is its broad public significance. The mural artist must conceive pictorially a social, religious, or patriotic theme on the appropriate scale in reference both to the structural exigencies of the wall and to the idea expressed. In the history of mural painting, many techniques have been used: encaustic painting, tempera painting, fresco painting, ceramics, oil paint on canvas, and, more recently, liquid silicate and fired porcelain enamel. In Classical Greco-Roman times, the most common medium was encaustic, in which colours are ground in a molten beeswax binder (or resin binder) and applied to the painting surface while hot. Tempera painting was also practiced from the earliest known times; the binder was an albuminous medium such as egg yolk or egg white diluted in water. In 16th-century Europe, oil paint on canvas came into general use for murals. The fact that it could be completed in the artist's studio and later transported to its destination and attached to the wall was of practical convenience. Yet oil paint is the least-satisfactory medium for murals: it lacks both brilliance of colour and surface

texture, many pigments are yellowed by the binder or are affected by atmospheric conditions, and the canvas itself is subject to rapid deterioration.

Early Manifestations and the Early Renaissance:

The Romans used mural painting to an extraordinary extent. In Pompeii and Ostia the walls and ceilings of almost all buildings, public and private, were painted in unified, inventive decorative schemes that encompassed a wide range of pictures, including landscape, still life, and figured scenes. However, at no other time before or since has mural decoration received a higher degree of creative concentration by artist and patron than in Europe during the Renaissance. A continuously inventive spirit and inquiring mind, a wealth of support from patrons, and an ever-awakening attitude toward new creative possibilities are characteristics of this remarkable age. One speaks by and large of an Early Renaissance (15th century), a High Renaissance (1500–30), and a Late Renaissance, or Mannerist, style (second and third quarters of the 16th century). The centres of activity were the various cities and the rival personalities and families who dominated each area as political and cultural leader. In Florence, undoubtedly the most important centre, the development reveals an emphasis on specific problems of form almost to the point of obsession. It began with the concentration on the monumental figure by Masaccio, whereby the solidly built forms in a three-dimensional space are closely integrated by gesture and light and shade to produce a dramatic unity. The skill seems to have been recognized and developed by succeeding artists such as Paolo Uccello, Piero della Francesca, and Melozzo da Forli. The grandiose frescoes of Luca Signorelli (chapel of San Brizio, Orvieto) reveal the concentration on anatomy and the well-modeled structure of many nude figures to achieve greater strength and articulation. This then becomes the point of departure for the great art of Michelangelo in the next century.

Fra Angelico: The AnnunciationThe Annunciation, fresco by Fra Angelico, 1438–45; in the Museum of San Marco, Florence.

As per Lüders, H. 1902. 'Ārya-Śūra's Jātakamālā und die Fresken von Ajantā,' in: *Nachrichten von der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften*, Göttingen, p. 758–762; repr. in: *Philologica Indica*, Göttingen, 1940, p. 73–77; tran. J. Burgess, in: *Indian Antiquary* 32, Bombay, 1903, p. 326–328. A second tradition is the more conservative and Gothic one exemplified by the pure and mystic expression of Fra Angelico (San Marco, Florence). A third tradition is a kind of romantic realism to be found in the frescoes by Fra Filippo Lippi (the cathedral at Prato) and Benozzo

Gozzoli (Medici Palace chapel, Florence). Both Lippi's and Gozzoli's murals reveal an awareness of the artistic problems of Masaccio but also a new interest in nature and its recognizable and realistic representation. Finally, these heterogeneous elements are combined into a highly sensitive and decorative style during the last quarter of the 15th century, particularly in the frescoes of Domenico Ghirlandaio and Sandro Botticelli.

Conclusion:

As per Goloubew, V. 1927. *Documents pour servir à l'étude d'Ajanta, Les peintures de la premiére grotte = Ars Asiatica* 10, Paris. The royal veneration of the "supreme Lord" thus provided additional validity to the earthly emperor. "It is therefore possible…the intention was to show society how powerful the Buddha was, presenting himself as the supreme teacher, crowned and seated on Indra's throne on Mount Meru," Bautze-Picron writes. The narrative settings of the Mahayana sutras, with the Buddha revealing new teachings in a vast court of Bodhisattvas, Brahminical gods and other divine beings, also reinforce this conceit. Quite ironically, the Vakataka emperor's identification with the Buddha was to play out in a tragic manner, both for the dynasty and for Buddhism in the Deccan. Soon after Harisena's death—while most of the caves and shrines at Ajanta were still unfinished—the Vakataka empire came to a sudden end, toppled by its ambitious feudatory kings. According to Spink's research, Ajanta itself was almost immediately abandoned and subsequent Buddhist centres moved to Aurangabad and, in a century or so, to Ellora, (As per Nagaraju, S. 1981. *Buddhist Architecture of Western India, c. 250 B.C.–c. A.D. 300.* Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan.) Buddhism would continue to be a major force in the region, especially at sites like Kanheri, close to the trading ports. But just as the end of the Guptas and the Vakatakas brought to an end the paradigm of large empires, so too would the medieval economy shift, with a vengeance, away from cities and trade to villages and agriculture. In this destabilised milieu of constant conflict and military adventurism of petty monarchs, the more violent tales of Puranic Hinduism, and the cult of Shiva, would supplant the ethical stories of the *Jatakas* and the cult of the Buddha, both in the narratives of the celestial emperor and in royal patronage. In fact, depictions of Shiva as an ascetic in *dhyana mudra* would soon perfectly mimic the Buddha's iconography. Kings would shift decisively away from Buddhist donations to land grants to Brahmins. Buddhism itself would survive, and indeed thrive, both in the Deccan and elsewhere in India, but for that, it would have to adapt to a new paradigm of power. Ajanta's art, meanwhile, would remain hidden and forgotten, a time capsule to a different country.

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