

Ajanta

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"Why should not a monument be raised by those possessing wealth, desirous of mundane happiness as also of liberation..."

...Inscription in cave 26

"As long as the sun [shines] with rays reddish like fresh red arsenic, even so long may this spotless cave containing an excellent hall dedicated... be enjoyed."

...Inscription in cave 16

The art, architecture and epigraphy of Ajanta



About Ajanta

The Ajanta caves, listed in UNESCO's World Heritage Sites, is one of the most known and aesthetically acclaimed heritages of India standing witness to the achievements of the ancient Indian artist, the *silpin*. This uniquely preserved evidence of what must have been a prevalent aesthetic tradition continent-wide, brings forth the fact that sculpture, painting and architecture were not separate categories in ancient India. A synthetic blend of the three arts inasmuch as seen and preserved at Ajanta is rare to find elsewhere.

Excavated during 2nd to 1st first century B.C. (Hinayana Phase) and 5th century A.D. (Mahayana Phase), the caves were left incomplete and abandoned waiting only to be rediscovered by Captain John Smith of 24, Madras Cavalry in 1819 purely by chance, Prof. R.C. Agrawal, Member Secretary, Indian Council for Historic Research (ICHR) however, says that there exists a manuscript of the Mughal period that makes a mention of Ajanta.

While more light on this aspect is awaited, the current understanding goes that Capt. John Smith while on a (hunting) expedition noticed the ancient caves, which were worship halls and monasteries, in an abandoned state for centuries. It was full of debris and inhabited by wild animals. His signature etched on one of the pillars of cave ten bears testimony to his presence. The gentleman reported the find at the Royal Asiatic Society, London in 1821. After this, other British officers also visited the site and reported about it in separate forums. Ajanta's lost fame was now gaining rejuvenation.

However, the early and mid 19th century descriptions of Ajanta were not received with enthusiasm. They tended to dismiss the paintings as barbaric and uncivilised.

By the turn of the 20th century the opinion turned around, marked by the visits of Lady Harringham, E.B. Havell, Coomaraswamy, Stella Kramrisch and other Revivalists. Foundations of the change were laid by pioneer archaeologists like James Fergusson and James Burgess who in their landmark publications took a more or less unbiased view pointing to the historical significance of the caves. They called for an urgent need to preserve them and restore their ancient glory. When the nationalist fervour had gripped India, and the historical and cultural studies had also been coloured by a new resurgent 'Indian'

perspective, no time was lost for the emergence of a collective sense of appraisal for Ajanta paintings.

The contribution of John Griffiths, Ghulam Yazdani, Charles Fabri and Herman Goetz are also extremely remarkable. Griffiths had the copies made of the paintings and published them with lively essays. Yazdani's volumes included for the first time systematic account of the subject matter, as much as he could identify. In the second half of the 20th Century, four scholars contributed significantly in the study of Ajanta.

Altekar wrote a systematic account on the history of the Deccan including the Vakatakas. V.V. Mirashi's expositions on the Vakataka's inscriptions was to change the future course of historical scholarship on Ajanta. Walter M. Spink followed suit and reconstructed a sequence of development of the cave site under the Vakatakas. Spink argues that the entire Mahayana cave activity involving a majority of the caves at the site were begun and completed in less than eighteen years, between 462 and 478 A.D.

However, most books published on Indian art with references to Ajanta acknowledge that the Mahayana phase was executed in late fifth century A.D., which is a significant point against the earlier dating attributing two to four centuries for the same. As regards the subject matter, Dieter Schlingloff has painstakingly identified most, if not all, the themes.

Scholars like Ajay Mitra Shastri, Ajay Ghosh, M.N. Deshpande, Nihar Ranjan Ray and Madanjeet Singh are among several others who have made substantial contribution to the Ajanta studies.

Historical details

There are 30 caves, of which five (9, 10, 19, 26 and 29) are *Chaitya-grihas* (sanctuary) and the rest *sangharamas* or *viharas* (monastery). They belong to two distinct phases of Buddhist rock-cut architecture, separated from each other by an interval of about four centuries. The Hinayana phase of activity took place from second century B.C. to first century A.D. and the Mahayana phase took place in a sudden burst of religious fervour and political patronage during late fifth century A.D. under the rule of the great Vakatakas. The earlier caves of Hinayana phase numbering six are an offshoot of the same Buddhist movement under the Satavahanas, which produced caves at other places in the Deccan, like Bhaja, Kondane, Pitalkhora, Nasik, etc.

No doubt, the most grand and gorgeous activity at Ajanta belongs to the realm of the Vakatakas of Vatsagulma (modern Basim, district Akola, Maharashtra), who were the contemporaries of imperial Guptas of north India. The two families were matrimonially related. Thus, Varahadeva, the minister of the Vakataka king Harishena (*circa* AD 460-480), dedicated Cave 16 to the Buddhist *Singh*, while Cave 17 was the gift of a prince (who subjugated Samara), as feudatory to the same king. On this phase, Walter M. Spunk's research has been widely noted.

IGNCA'S initiative on Ajanta

IGNCA initiative on Ajanta comes in the wake of the Centre's commitment to apply the latest that the modern technology offers, to conserve, preserve and propagate the cultural heritages of India. The Centre's Cultural Informatics Lab, one of the most well-equipped labs in the country has provided the necessary technical support to the Ajanta CD-ROM project. Its objective is to present Ajanta to the people in an affordable price through an accessible medium.

The academic support to the project comes from an expert committee set up for the purpose. Its members are: Prof. R.C. Agrawal, Shri M.N. Deshpande, Ex-Director General, Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Prof. G.C. Tripathi, IGNCA, Prof. R.K. Bhattacharya, IGNCA and Prof. Indra Nath Choudhuri Academic Director and Officiating Member Secretary, IGNCA.

Once launched, the arena of CD-ROM's distribution has been envisaged to be global. ASI has shown interest in the project. The details of collaboration in post-production are to be worked out. The CD will be priced low.

Features

The features of the CD-ROM are as vital as simplistic. There are six main components having separate identities within the Navigation and User's Interface programme. Yet, they are interlinked for a greater facility for the user. Information desired will be available in 2-3 mouse clicks.

The components are:

2-D VR Walkthrough

Virtual Reality Walkthrough CD-ROMs on the subject of art and archaeology are not often to come by in India though they do exist now in a certain number in many countries.

The reason for this is that the task is very demanding, involving high cost, sophisticated infrastructure, manpower and institutional support. A '3D-Walkthrough' in this instance is possible only with the direct involvement of the ASI and the Ministry of Tourism and Culture.

Audiovisual narratives of the Jatakas

The CD-ROM would have a component devoted to animated drawings with voiceover showing the sequence of the Jataka episodes as painted here and there in a nonlinear fashion on the surface of the cave walls. These drawings are contributions of renowned scholars, Dieter Schlingloff and Monika Zin. The former's landmark publication, *Guide to Ajanta Paintings, Part I* has been effectively used for the purpose, for which Prof. Schlingloff and Dr. Zin were kind enough to grant permission.

This feature would be one of the most invaluable components of the CD-ROM from the viewpoint of studying the subject matter of Ajanta, as nowhere else one gets to see the delineation of the sequence of the episodes of Jataka scenes. Through this, the user would be able to see the different treatments that the same Jataka has received elsewhere within the cave site.

Textual content

There would be text matter ranging about a hundred pages, which would be in line with the present researches on various aspects including the chronology, development, subject matter, iconography, technique, medium, material etc. An encyclopaedic approach is being followed, the language to be simplistic, jargon free, not burdened with academic lingo. It will present a panoramic view of the site as a whole.

Still images

There is a provision of about a thousand still images on various aspects of painting, sculpture and architecture. Some of the images have been taken afresh by an in-house team, which visited the site and captured them digitally. Images from other in-house resources, like the slide unit, are also incorporated.

Video

'A picture is equal to one thousand words' is an old proverb. Shall we also say, 'a video is equal to a thousand pictures.' An in-house team went to the site with due permissions from Archaeological Survey

of India and has taken useful footages to be used at various locations within the CD-ROM's Navigation Programme. Although the lighting conditions inside the caves pose peculiar difficulties, it was possible with the help a good digital video camera to capture relevant portions. The footages are going to be linked to various screens as required by the user and as dictated by the Navigation Path.

Epigraphy

There is an epigraphy section that showcases for the first time all the extant inscriptions relating to the site in the form of still images, transliteration and translation.

The only other source for all related inscriptions, though not covering the recent discoveries, is V.V.Mirashi's. *The Inscriptions of the Vakatakas*, Ootakmand, 1963(?), which is sadly, out of print. This section would be of great use to the advanced learner because it would also update the corpus of the inscriptions thus facilitating the Ajanta and Vakatakas' studies.

Concluding remarks

Speaking about the uniqueness of the venture, suffice it to say that it is the first attempt of this kind. The demand for such a visual presentation of the caves has been long pending. The CD-ROM addresses this need directly.

No other medium provides a combines, integral and total experience of knowing and realisation of the site as envisaged here digitally. We remain in no doubt that these features with six components, mentioned above, will go far to provide an unprecedented experience of Ajanta, being one of world's greatest achievements.

- By Rajesh Singh,