

Ajanta : Mahayanist ?

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I am indeed very happy to be here today (26 November 2013) at the launching of Professor Schlingloff's magnum opus on Ajanta and for this I am grateful to the authorities of the IGNCA for inviting me to participate in the Symposium on Ajanta. I must confess that there was not enough time for going through thoroughly in all the three volumes. We must also mention that the IGNCA has placed the scholarly world under a deep debt of gratitude by publishing the work in English.

A most noteworthy feature of Schlingloff's work is that we now have the complete treasure of Ajanta in sketches. He has even completed a few fragmentary ones. They clearly show the influence of the Amaravati art. It is amazing that the drawings could be made in one's lifetime and one can imagine the tremendous amount of hard work in making them. The bibliography too is exhaustive. The sketches are all artistic and authentic like those of Syed Ahmed and Jalaluddin which are included in Yazdani's volumes which were so elegantly published by Oxford University Press in the thirties. Just as Yazdani covered the entire Ajanta in colour, the present work does it in line drawings. So almost after seventy-five years we have a complete Ajanta again.

Professor Schlingloff's Ajanta in three volumes is a standing monument to his sterling scholarship. They will be extremely useful to scholars and students alike as every minor detail of the paintings can be distinctly made out. For example, the chatuhsala house depicted in a painting in Cave 9, datable to mid-first century BCE, which I have been seeing since my student days, appeared in Yazdani's coloured pictures as have only one courtyard around which rooms were built. But in Schlingloff's drawings, particularly the plan which is appended, it is now clear that the house has two courtyards with a set of rooms in between them. But sometimes important details are not seen, as for instance, the tilaka mark on the forehead of Mahajanaka's mother in the Mahajanaka Jataka in Cave 1, and that of Irandati in the Vidura Pandita Jataka in Cave 2.

A crucial issue has been raised : Is there Mahayana at Ajanta? (1). At the root of this query is Gregory Schopen's article on 'Mahayana' in the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism (2). He writes :

“Textual sources placed the beginning of Mahayana in the second century CE with the first translation of Lokakshema’s Sukhavati-vyuha-sutra which is central to the Mahayanists.... The evidence outside the textual corpus, does not corroborate the conclusion that Mahayana started around the beginning of the Common Era. The principal reason is the utter lack of inscripational and archaeological records in support of such a conclusion. There is just an isolated inscription and an image depicting Amitabha, the deity most central to Mahayana during the whole period of five centuries. The inscription refers to Hinayana groups : the Sarvastivadins, Mahasanghikas and Chetiyas etc. Thus it was not the period of Mahayana but of Hinayana.

This question cropped up because the earlier scholars like Burgess and others had broadly classified the Buddhist caves in Maharashtra on the basis of the presence or absence of the Buddha image, and since Ajanta caves were assigned to the 6th-7th century, the later group was taken to belong to Mahayana. But in recent years Professor Walter Spink, who has devoted his life time to the study of Ajanta, has dated them to about 460-480 CE. Naturally therefore it the affiliation of the later group to Mahayana has been questioned because it is argued that the sect then was still in the formative stage.

This however is not the truth because there is evidence to show that the Mahayanists were gradually coming into prominence. A close examination of the epigraphic and art evidence indicates that the Mahayana elements were already present even in the second century. For example, attempts were made to carve out Buddha images in the Chaitya cave 3 at Kanheri where on the right pillar in the forecourt, one near the base standing and the other at the top seated.. Yet another, an unfinished one, is on a pillar in the hall. Although Buddha image is not taken to be the monopoly of the Mahayanists, it is clear that it appears with the rise of Mahayana. The Kanheri chaitya is dated to the last quarter of the second century on the basis of the inscription in it which mentions that the donation was made in the reign of Yajnasri Satakarni (170-99 CE). This epigraph also states that the grant was given for the happiness and welfare of all which is the Mahayana formula, and not deya-dhamma, in the Hinayana tradition. Even earlier, there are a few records at Junnar in which we come across the Mahayana formula..

Again at Kanheri we come across the domination of Mahayana which is clear from Avalokitesvara images such as the eleven headed, the litany (two panels), with Tara and Bhrikuti, and above all Akshobhya in Cave 41. At Ajanta too, there are Avalokitesvara images in painting and sculpture as well, his litany, and Manushi Buddhas which all is betoken of the domination of Mahayana at Ajanta.

It is likely that at Ajanta Mahayanists may not have been overwhelming as at Ellora where even Vajrayana influence is discernible. The reason for this is that at most of the Buddhist cave monasteries in

Maharashtra both the Hinayabnists and Mahayanists were living amicably together as testified by Yuan Chwang. And this is probably the reason why Professor Schlingloff is not very emphatic in spite of the fact he has identified some of the narratives on the basis of Avadana stories which are Mahaynist. He states : (Vol.I, p.75)

“The majority of narrative paintings are based on the Vinaya of the Mula-sarvstivadin, and on the poems of Aryasura and Asvaghosha (Saundar-ananda). All the works of literature, connected with the paintings, belong to the Hinayana, and accordingly, themes that are particularly ‘Mahayanistic’, were not portrayed with the possible exception of the Avalokitesvara devotional pictures. The term Mahayana for the later caves, which originates from the time when the literary background of the paintings was still unknown can therefore only be used as a label, it would be a mistake to form a conclusion about the ideology behind the paintings on the basis of this term.”

Since the Mahayana affiliation of Ajanta is a crucial question, it is better to analyse the textual evidence and collate it with that of art and architecture of the caves. The final product at Ajanta are the chaityas 19 and 26 in which we find stupas with Buddha images carved on their front. This is a great leap from Hinayana stupas and the problem therefore deserves to be examined threadbare. The change is first noticed at the site itself where Chaitya 10 is of standard plan, apsidal with central nave and side aisles, and vaulted roof, with a huge arch on the façade. There is a major deviation in Chaitya 9 which is quadrangular on plan but the pillars are disposed in an apsidal fashion.

Junnar

Further development takes place at Junnar which has the largest complex of Buddhist caves, but dispersed in different groups. Here Ganesh Leni 6 is a standard chaitya conforming to the Hinayana plan but the chaitya arch is blind. This was not done deliberately but there was no alternative because of a loose stratum of rock. The same was the case with Amba-Ambika 26 of which the hall is not apsidal but rather irregular. This seems to have led to quadrangular chaityas at Junnar, as for instance, Bhimashankar 2, Ganesh Leni 14, Shivneri East 2 and so on. The apsidal and vaulted roofed chaitya becomes now quadrangular, astylar and flat roofed.

These changes were taking place in the first half of the second century during the supremacy of the Western Kshatrapas who forced the Satavahanas to the southern Deccan for some time. But in the latter half of the second century the Satavahanas again assert their domination in Maharashtra under

the leadership of Yajnasri Satakarni (170-99) when the impressive Chaitya 3 at Kanheri was excavated. It is the last standard Hinayana chaitya because the decline of the Satavahanas created political instability with economic degeneration resulting in decrease in long distance trade which affected the art activity. This is the most important reason for the hiatus between the Hinayana and the Mahayana caves in Maharashtra when the art activity came to a grinding halt and picked up again in the fifth century.

All these early caves are Hinayana monuments but it seems that Mahayana elements were already being introduced. The donative inscription in Shivneri East 4, which is engraved on the right wall of its forecourt, mentions that it was donated by a

merchant named Virasenaka for sava-loka-hita-sukhaya which indicates Mahayana influence, and the same is the case with that in Kanheri chaitya 3 which ends with savvasa-cha-hita-sukhaya. (S. Gokhale, No.53). What is more, there are three early Buddha figures in the Kanheri chaitya 3. This may be due to the influence from Amaravati and Nagarjunikonda (Andhra Pradesh).

Kuda

When the Mahayanist influence was being felt at a few centres in Maharashtra, changes were being introduced in the layout of the chaityas because patronage was not available for raising huge apsidal chaityas and chatushala viharas. The most noteworthy site in this respect is Kuda (Dt. Ratnagiri) on the sea coast which has 28 Late Hinayana caves datable to the mid-third century. Most of them were donated by a family of four brothers and their wives. They themselves were writers and the inscriptions engraved by them are probably the most beautiful records that read like sign boards.

Considerable development took place at Kuda. Chaitya 9 is a quadrangular chamber containing a stupa with a verandah at the front and a cell with bench on the left. Cave 15 is identical and has a room each at either end of the verandah. Chaitya 1 is like a temple with a verandah, a hall and a shrine joined to it by a vestibule (antarala). The development is complete with chaitya 6 with the addition of benches on three sides of the hall. Cave 4 is similar but is incomplete. The epigraphs end with deya-dhamma.

Mahad

Small caves combining chaitya and vihara were thus coming up in the interior of Maharashtra most of which have remained unfinished for want of adequate patronage. At Kanheri, however, the art

activity continued, albeit on a much reduced scale. The Kanheri viharas resemble small bungalows and consist of a single room with a verandah, benches in the hall and cells for meditation, It appears that loose images were worshipped by monks in cells as one wooden image of Tara was found sometime ago in Cave 32. Kanheri is thus a separate complex which has no parallel elsewhere.

Among the architectural experiments that were underway in the post-Satavahana era, the most remarkable is that at Mahad, an ancient trading centre on the Mumbai-Goa highway. In its group of 28 caves, Nos. 1 and 8, both chaityas, are most remarkable. They can be said to be the link between the Hinayana and the Mahayana caves at Ajanta as they bear striking resemblance between them and Ajanta 11 and 8 respectively. Of the two, Mahad 8, which is well planned, consists of a squarish hall (4.50.m sq) with a shrine in the rear wall, flanked by a cell with bench and three similar cells in side walls. The hall has benches on the three sides. The verandah is ruined but its pillars have survived; they have squarish bases and bear lotus medallions which later fully develop at Ajanta. The bell shaped capital has stepped abacus above like those at Kuda. The shrine once contained a rock cut stupa as the circular mark on the floor and the chhatra in the ceiling indicate; the stupa is completely destroyed.

An inscription on the back wall of the hall states that the chaitya-griha, eight cells and two cisterns are the gift of prince Kanahboa Vanupalita. (Date – Dehejia 100 AD, Nagaraju 90-150). I would place it in the latter half of the third century.

Mahad chaitya 1 is probably later than No,8 and is problematic. It consists of a quadrangular hall (17.54 x 10.52, 3.20 m ht) with a pillared verandah, and a squarish shrine in the back wall. The hall has four cells in the left wall and four more in the rear wall, all unfinished, two each flanking the shrine chamber. It also has a running bench on all four sides. The shrine chamber (6.10 x 5.19 m) has an entrance flanked by a large window as in Kuda chaitya 6. Inside there is a squarish mass of rock which, from its shape, seems to have been intended for a stupa, but what we see at the front is a Buddha image in the pralamba-pada as in Ajanta 19 and 26 and in Ellora 10. On the throne below is the dharmachakra and deer, male attendants with fly whisk bearers flanking Buddha and Vidyadharas hovering above in the sky. At the top is a makara-torana with flying figures holding a crown. Unfortunately, the face, the chest and the abdomen of Buddha has been scooped out. .

On the back of the rock mass has been carved an outline of a seated Buddha and on the left face of the rock is Vajrapani who has a stupa in his crown whereas on the right face is Padmapani. All this imagery belongs to the sixth century.

The cave appears to be a late excavation of the late third or early fourth century, including the rock mass intended for a stupa and possibly the Buddha figure at the front; other imagery is later. According to Vidya Dehejia and Nagaraju, it is a Mahayana chaitya and hence they have not included it in their studies; Burgess also does not say anything about its sectarian affiliation obviously because of the images of Buddha and Bodhisattvas in the shrine.

Ajanta 8

The Mahad cave 8 has an almost exact parallel at Ajanta in Cave 8. The cave is absolutely unknown, even to the scholarly world as it is used for housing generators that supply power to the site. The late Dr Suresh Jadhav meticulously studied it and prepared its plan from whatever remains of it because it is totally ruined. .

The cave is located in the centre of the Ajanta complex. It consists of a squarish hall (7.60 m sq, 3.5 m ht) with three roughly squarish cells in side walls and two each flanking the stupa (?) shrine which is joined to it by an antechamber. There is a bench in the rear wall of the shrine where possibly the object of worship was placed, and also along the side walls. The verandah is totally ruined. The cave shares many features with Mahad, Kuda and Kanheri and can be assigned to the late third or early fourth century.

Ajanta 11

This cave is most crucial as it forms the link between the Hinayana and the Mahayana groups. Even Walter Spink is of the opinion that it is the earliest in the later group. It has some early and some later features. It consists of a hall with verandah at the

front and a shrine in the rear wall. The verandah pillars have square bases, but the shafts are octagonal with bracket capitals. At either end of the verandah is a cell each and its right wall is carved with three panels showing Buddha figures. The hall is supported by four pillars with moulded bases with octagonal shafts and ghata-pallava capitals. There are three cells each in the back and left walls and a bench along the right wall as at Junnar, Kanheri and other sites. The shrine contains a Buddha image in teaching attitude carved against an unfinished stupa; the image is also unfinished and recalls that in Mahad 1 which further develops in Chaityas 19 and 26 at Ajanta.

There is a painted inscription in the cave which can be palaeographically assigned to the latter half of the fifth century. However, Spink has shown that there are two phases of painting in the cave and dates the cave to mid-fifth century.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of evidence available at some of the minor sites amply brings into sharp focus the evolution of early Hinayana chaityas belonging to the hiatus between the Hinayana and the Mahayana groups during 200-450 CE, starting from Ajanta 9 itself and culminating in Ajanta in 19 and 26 via Junnar, Kuda and Mahad in which we find the combination of a stupa and the Buddha image. In fact the beginning was made at Nagarjunikonda where in some of the Iksvaku viharas there are two shrines, one for stupa and the other for the Buddha image. These objects of worship were separated obviously because they belonged to two different sects viz. the Hinayana and the Mahayana respectively. An attempt was made to combine them in Mahad 1 as also in Ajanta 11 and perfected in Ajanta 19 and 26 as also in Ellora 10.

The image worship in Buddhism has rightly been credited to the Mahayanists as also that of Avalokitesvara, Manushi Buddhas and Tara which are all present in the later

group at Ajanta besides Avalokitesvara's litany, both in sculpture and painting. All these, beside the Mahayana donative formula of inscriptions, certainly point to the Mahayana presence of Mahayanists at Ajanta and shows that adherents of both the sects were living together amicably as witnessed by Yuan Chwang. The only conclusion we can draw from the evidence is that neither of the sects was dominant at Ajanta and we should therefore agree with Professor Schlingloff who says that it is not correct to label Ajanta - particularly the later group of caves – as either Hinayanists or Mahayanists.