

Relevance of Professor Schlingloff's work in the Understanding of Cultural Trends in Post Ajanta Western Indian Buddhist Caves.

Ajanta has a unique place in western Indian Buddhist caves. These caves are the exceptionally well preserved. Most of the caves were abundant by the Rashtrakuta Period and forgotten till rediscovery of the same in 1819.

The site has exhibited exceptional examples of parallels between paintings and sculptures as most of the paintings are preserved here which are lost at other sites in western India. There are numerous themes demonstrated in sculptures as well as in paintings. Few significant out of them are listed viz. Mahapratiharya, Rahula and the Buddha, Litany of Avalokiteshvara, Maravijaya, etc.

The stylistic development which is seen here at site is dynamic. There are no parallels to this. It is interesting to see that due to royal patronage at the site most of the forms, themes and symbols evolve rapidly. Each cave here is unique and narrates the story of the AJANTA through the Art and architecture.

Ajanta can be looked upon as a trend setter in art and iconography. 'Mahayana' art and architecture was in its formative stage. There are numerous forms and iconographic trends which were popularized by the site within no time. Unique patronage, fusion of art styles and Mahayana monastic set up with nikayas like Sarvastivada and Chetika, makes Ajanta an exclusive site.

Art and architecture at Ajanta help us to understand the development from Theravada nikayas philosophies to Mahayana philosophy. This change in Buddhism is an interesting process of evolution of Buddhism as a religion.

Schism in Buddhism:

Devadatta, The Buddha's half brother, attempted various times to spilt the Sangha. In the last sermon, the Buddha said to follow his teachings (Dhammakaya). That had made clear that there won't be any chief of the Sangha after his Mahaparinirvana. As a result of this, immediately after the demise of the lord, a *sangiti* was called. This was mainly to compile Sutta and Vinaya text to preserve those orally. The story of monk Yasha in Vinaya Pitaka tells us, how within 100 years the authenticity of Vinaya tradition was challenged and first major split in Sangha took place. Available record says that the very first attempt to codify Pitakas was made by Simhala King Valagamba, who was also known as Vattagamini (1st Century BCE).

This was just the beginning. Till the rise of Ashoka, the Maurya, there were not less than 18 Nikayas and Acharyakulas in Buddhism. The rise of these schools was mainly either due to controversy over Vinaya or interpretation of some Abhidhamma Principle. Most of these schools had their own set of Pitakas, though most of them are lost today, very few are preserved in Tibetan, Chinese, Sinhali and Thai traditions.

These Nikayas had their own set of literary traditions which was initially orally preserved. There was a healthy dialogue among these nikayas, ultimately resulted into philosophical developments as well as development of numerous rituals in Buddhism. This was nothing else but the journey from Theravada to Mahayana through various nikayas like Lokottaravada, Mahishasaka, Sarvastivada, Sautrantika, Vaibhashika and then in the later period schools like Madhyamika and Yogachara.

It is interesting to see that each one of them had a set of literary traditions developing parallel to each other emphasizing teachings and interpretations of their own nikayas. There are common stories, themes and narrative passages seen in literature. This has resulted into literary parallels, which were used as a reference by artists in Ancient India. Each of the depiction in art had a base of literary traditions which were the result of an explicit philosophical foundation. Every panel, may be sculptural or painted, had a functional role to play, and may be associated with the preaching or popular religious practices.

These Nikayas and Acharyakulas spread beyond the Ganga Valley. Rather they were responsible to take Buddhism beyond the physical boundaries of India. Inscriptions and literature tell us about the dominant regions of the nikayas in India as well as abroad. They are region specific and even in the later period certain concessions were given in specific Vinaya rule to some regions. Such cultural understanding is necessary for the better understanding of development of Buddhism.

Professor Schlingloff, for the first time, precisely studies all the details in the paintings at Ajanta and made an attempt to identify the exact literary tradition followed by the artist. He has compiled all the literary traditions contemporary to paintings at Ajanta narrating the same theme. With the minute study of depictions as well as art historical parallels, pinpointed the exact literary source used by artist. This was a herculean task. This has helped us to understand the nikaya traditions existed at Ajanta in 5th century CE as a part of monastic establishment.

There are few themes which occur repetitively not only at Ajanta but also in western Indian Buddhist rock-cut caves. One of such themes is of miracle at Shravasti which was performed by the Buddha. This panel is referred as Mahapratiharya by Professor Schlingloff. This is one of the most popular themes in Buddhist literature. Professor Schlingloff points out various literary traditions of the story most probably do not having common source of origin. After a detail discussion he points out with certain details that the source used here at Ajanta by artists is none other than the Mulasarvastivada tradition.

It is not so that the existence of Mulasarvastivada at Ajanta was not known to us. Depiction of Kotikarnavadana and Purnavadana from Divyavadana had given us the clues even earlier. This interpretation by Professor Schlingloff is important to draw parallels between Ajanta and other western Indian Buddhist rock-cut sites. There are numerous panels which can be identified as a stylized and stereotypes of Mahapratiharya, where all episodes from the story are not depicted but certain suggestive symbols are prominently emphasized. Such panels can be seen in caves like cave 26. Chronologically all these are intrusive panels. The traditions continue at all other sites in western Indian who receive the legacy from Ajanta. Kanheri, Karla, Nasik, Mahad, Junnar are few important sites where such panels are carved in late 5th and early 6th century CE.

A panel from Kanheri is worth mentioning. There is a panel in the hall of cave 89 at Kanheri. This can be identify as the Mahapratiharya Panel on the basis of certain details depicted here as the depiction of Mango tree. As Professor Schlingloff identifies, mango tree episode is a particular Mulasarvastivada phenomenon. This has not only helped interpret the panel but also the development of Buddhism at Kanheri. Mulasarvastivada played a peculiar role in the development of cult images and their sects at Kanheri and other sites. This could be only understood through the work of Professor Schlingloff.

Another panel which draws our attention at Ajanta is the panel of Sumati. This panel is repeatedly painted and carved at Ajanta. There is only one depiction of this story in western India except Ajanta, i.e. in Kanheri 67. This story is also known as Nidanakatha in the Jataka tradition and mainly comes in the commentaries on Jataka section of Pali canonical literature. Professor Schlingloff has identified certain details in the panel like 'the lady who was selling flowers and helps the Brahmin Sumati' is not seen in the canonical literature as well as in commentaries. This again talks about one of the Mahayana element involve in it and i.e. of transfer of merit as well as grace merit.

Decline of Ajanta left a deep impact on other western Indian rock-cut sites. Most of the caves in late 5th and early 6th century CE had the legacy of Ajanta. Aurangabad, Kanheri, Mahad, Nasik, Karla, Ellora, Kuda, Mahakali (Kondivate) are the sites which give the evidence of the continuation of the Ajanta style and religious tradition.

Nasik:

There are caves at the end of the row of early caves which can be dated to late 5th and early 6th century CE and ornamented with sculptures. Most note worthy panels here are the Trinity (The Buddha attended by Bodhisattvas), Mahapratiharya (the stereo type one) and Mahaparinirvana of Gautama, the Buddha. These panels stylistically fall in the Ajanta tradition. Professor schlingloff's work has helped us to contextualize these panels. Earlier those were just referred as Mahayana Buddhist panels, but due to efforts taken by Prof. Schlingloff today we understand that there was a hold of Sarvastivada at Nasik in late 5th and early 6th century CE.

Kanheri:

Kanheri is one of the most important Buddhist sites in western India, comprising more than 125 caves. Though most of them belong to the pre-Ajanta phase, along with late 5th and early 6th century CE caves, these early caves were also ornamented with sculptures in post Ajanta period. The site gives us the clear evidence of influences coming from Ajanta in second half of 5th century CE in the form of paleography of inscriptions in cave 87 and few architectural forms and artistic patterns in caves 26, 50 and 90. There were not less than 25 caves and 170 sculptural panels excavated here in the post Ajanta period. There are sculptural parallels to Ajanta which could be studied with the help of Prof. Schlinloff's work, viz.

1. Mahapratiharya (Caves 89, 90, 50, 67, 74, etc.)
2. Sumati (Cave 67)
3. Trinity, i.e. the Buddha attended by Bodhisattvas (Caves 67, 89, 90, 87, 41, etc.)

Mahayana phase at Kanheri evinces of the unique sculptural panels. A huge brick and stone stupa in cave 87 give the evidence of narrative sculptural panels (presently kept in Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (Formerly Prince of Wales), and ASI collection) which are still unidentified. Sadashiva Gorakshakar has identified one of them as 'Simhalavadana' on the basis of parallels form Ajanta. At Ajanta the *avadana* is painted in cave 17. Another slab in the possession of ASI depicts the scene of Mahaparinirvana of Gautama, the Buddha (more or less similar to one at Nasik though more in detail). This is again a unique depiction closer to Ajanta and later continued at Nasik and Aurangabad.

It is not just the identifications of narratives but also the methodology which is followed by Prof. Schlingloff, is useful for the better understanding of the Buddhist rock-cut sites as well as the nature of Buddhism in western Indian. The methodology has revealed great secrets of Buddhism in western India. There were few texts which were popular at Kanheri, viz.

1. Saddharmapundarika Sutra
2. Ekadashamukham
3. Ekadashamukha Avalokiteshvara Sutra / Dharini

Depiction of Sarvandada Avalokiteshvara (popularly known as Litany of Avalokiteshvara) is based on Saddharmapundarika Sutra. This panel is the continuation of the depiction of the same at Ajanta (caves 10 A, 4, 26, 17 and 2). There are three such depiction of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara at Kanheri (caves 2, 41 and 90) and the tradition continues at Aurangabad and Ellora. Prof. Schlinloff's work (mainly the methodology) has helped us to understand and interpret the panel in better manner.

Similarly another panel at Kanheri is associated with two other texts, i.e. Ekadashamukha Avalokiteshvara. Methodology which is proposed by Prof. Schlingloff guides us to study this sculpture. There are two texts Ekadashamukha Avalokiteshvara Sutra / Dharini and

Ekadashamukhas associated with the sculpture. A manuscript of Ekadashamukha has been reported from the Gilgit monastery in Pak occupied Kashmir before independence. This is a ritual text and narrates in detail rituals associated with the worship and cultic traditions of the eleven headed Avalokiteshvara.

There are few panels which are either unidentified or vaguely discussed. There is a need of special study of such panels.

1. Panel of Seven / Eight Buddhas.
2. Buddhist Trinity (Buddha attended by Bodhisattvas)
3. Few narrative Panels from Bhaje, Kanheri, Thanale, etc are yet to be identified.
4. There are individual images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas at Kanheri, Nasik, Aurangabad and Ellora which need to be iconographically studied and should be placed in the literary context.

Professor Schlinloff's work is a methodological experiment in the field of Art and iconography. This will definitely help the future generation of scholars to understand Buddhist art in a better manner. The methodology which Professor Schlingloff has introduced can help us to solve many riddles in western Indian Buddhism.

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