Ch. 4: The Sātavāhanas and Vākāṭakas: an updated outline

THE SĀTAVĀHANAS

The Political and cultural map of ancient India will be incomplete without the mention of Sātavāhana dynasty that ruled over a vast region of south central India, with varying borders, over a span of four and a half centuries. It is also known as the Āndhra or Āndhrabhṛtya dynasty. Their rule spanned from circa 228 BCE to circa 224 CE (Table 1). It was during this reign that five of the 29 caves of Ajantā were excavated: Caves 9 and 10 that are stūpa temples; and Caves 12, 13, and 15A, which are residential *upāśrayas* without any shrine (Table 7).

This dynasty became prominent during the decline of the Maurya, Śunga, and Kaṇva kingdoms. Initially, they were feudatories of the Mauryas, but soon they were successful in establishing their own kingdoms with capitals in Amarāvati (modern Andhra Pradesh) and Pratiṣṭhāna (modern Paiṭhaṇ in Maharashtra). The matter of names and succession of the Sātavāhana kings has always been a contentious issue among historians. Here, the version of S. Nagaraju is followed. This is because Nagaraju has assessed a number of sources: epigraphic, *purāṇic*, archaeological, and numismatic before arriving at his conclusions.

Patronage

The Sātavāhana kings were Brahmans who relied upon *dharmaśāstras* to run the affairs of the state and performed sacrifices such as Aśvamedha, Rājasūya, Agnyadheya, Anvaramgatirātra, Chhāndogapavamān-atirātra, Trayodaśarātra, and Daśarātra. They worshipped Saṃkarṣaṇa, Vāsudeva, Indra, the Sun, the Moon, Kṛṣṇa, Paśupati or Siva, and Gaurī. They were also into serpent worship.

The Sātavāhana kings were largely tolerant of other faiths, and actively encouraged Buddhism. In fact, they were materially supportive of Buddhism and Hinduism in equal measures. This is learned not only from archaeological evidence but also more directly by the donations and

inscriptions at Pitalkhorā, Nasik, Bhājā, Beḍsā, Konḍāṇe, and Kuḍā—the monastic sites with rock-cut architecture in western India. In other regions, the Sātavāhana kings donated lavish stūpas like Bhaṭṭiprolu, Amarāvati, Goli, Ghaṇṭaśālā, and Gummadidurru. Even the feudatories, officials, merchants, and laypersons made donations in cash and kind.

Contemporary Ajantā caves

The *saṅghārāma* of Ajantā had its origin during the supportive reign of the Sātavāhanas. At this time, ranging from late 3rd c. BCE to 2nd c. BCE, five caves were excavated at Ajantā. According to S. Nagaraju, the *ćaitya* Cave 10 and the residential Cave 13 were the earliest excavations of Ajantā, datable to late third century BCE. Cave 12 is datable to circa 175 BCE. During mid-second century BCE, the *ćaitya* Cave 9 and residential Cave 15A were excavated.

THE VĀKĀTAKAS

For long, it was believed that India's so-called "Golden Age" was heralded by the Guptas. In recent decades, significant advancement in Vākāṭaka history has taken place, which points to a major role played by this dynasty in the making of the Golden Age. Various scholars have propounded various theories and chronologies of the Vākāṭakas, because it is still an unfolding area of historical research. We do not still have

the fuller picture of the Vākāṭakas. Citing older researches may be very hazardous. Therefore, for our updated account we have relied on a number of sources. Our update borrows from recent research; see (Mirashi 1963), (Shastri 1997), (H. Bakker 2004), Harman Kulke (H. Bakker 2004), and (W. M. Spink 2006).

The Vākāṭakas (Table 2) have somehow remained on the margins of historical literature. However, they are very important for our discussion in this thesis, as it is during the reign of the Vākāṭakas that the renaissance of Ajantā started (Table 3). It was unanimously agreed in a conference on the Vākāṭakas held recently in Germany (H. Bakker 2004) that the dynasty seem to have had two branches, or rather two separate independent kingdoms, which could be called the Eastern Vākāṭakas and the Western Vākāṭakas. The region of Ajantā fell in the dominion of the Western Vākāṭakas whose capital lay in the ancient Vatsagulma (modern Wāshim) (Figures 9-11).

Although the two shared the same lineage initially, they were soon the rulers of independent sovereign states. The Vākāṭakas have been called the Vindhyakas in the Pūrāṇas. They constituted the greatest political power in Deccan and Central India during the fourth and fifth centuries CE. This period saw an explosion of artistic activity as well as economic prosperity. Some of the best-preserved caves at

Ajantā were patronised by their ministers and feudatories. Some of the Vākāṭaka monarchs were great Prākṛt poets themselves, with their works eulogised by later literary critics.

The question of the origin of the Vākāṭakas has been long debated. Bakker is of the view that they emerged in the Vindhyan region of present-day Madhya Pradesh. Later, they shifted southwards as there was no scope for expansion in the north because of the rising power of the Imperial Guptas and the Nāgas of Padmāvatī, with whom they appear to have had friendly relations. They sensed an opportunity in the Deccan, where there was no such potential power at that time. Gradually, they carved out a substantial kingdom, comprising the area of Madhya Pradesh, to the south of Narmadā (viz. Betul-Chhindwārā and Siwani-Bālāghāṭ region), the Vidarbha-Khāndeś-Maraṭhwāḍā region (Maharashtra), and perhaps some parts of northern Karnāṭaka near Biḍar, the last one at a comparatively later stage of their career. They played an important role in contemporary Indian politics and maintained friendly relations with the Imperial Guptas and Nāgas in the north, the Viṣṇukuṇḍins (475–615 CE) in eastern Deccan (near Andhra Pradesh), and the Kadambas in the western Deccan (near Karnāṭaka). Thus, we have now come to realise that the Vākāṭakas at the zenith of power ruled over a vast territory of India. They were good patrons of religion and art in

fourth and fifth century India. They were contemporaries of the Guptas. During the fifth century, when they were at their peak, the Vākāṭakas occupied most of the regions of western central and eastern India. The extent of our knowledge about them has been inadequate until recently.

Indeed, the kingdoms of the Vākāṭakas were situated at the crossroads of culture. The north-south and east-west caravan routes passed through their kingdoms. The highway from Prayāga via Vidiśā in Mālwa to Pratiṣṭhāna (Paiṭhaṇ) ran through the Western Vākāṭaka kingdom along Ajantā. The other north-south highway, running from Kauśāmbi to the Kṛṣṇā-Godāvari delta, passed the capital of the Eastern Vākāṭakas, i.e. Nandivardhana or Pravarapura (modern Nāgārdhan and Manasar). The two north-south highways were intersected by the west-east road that connected the ports at the Arabian Sea (Śūrparāka or Sopārā) and Kalyāṇa with the hinterland; this highway ran through the kingdoms of the Western and Eastern Vākāṭakas and ended in Śarabhapura and Śripura (Sirpur) in Dakṣiṇa Kośala (Chhattisgarh). This accounted for the prosperity and cultural diversity of the Vākāṭakas, which is reflected in the Hindu temples in and around Rāmagiri (Rāmṭek Hill) and the Buddhist caves of Ajantā. The major religions of the times—Buddhism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Śaivism—all had important settlements in the Vākāṭaka kingdoms.

Altekar (The Vakatakas 1946), Mirashi (1963), and Shastri (Vakatakas: Sources and History, Great Ages of Indian History series 1997) postulated that the Vākāṭakas had two branches. Shastri believed that there was a third branch reigning from Pravarapura. However, in the latest reassessment the 'branch' theory has given way to the idea of two separate kingdoms. The Eastern and Western Vākāṭakas were two different, largely autonomous kingdoms. Vindhyaśakti was the progenitor of the dynasty, according to Purāṇic and epigraphic sources. However, his, son Pravaraṣeṇa I (*ca.* 275–335 CE), was probably the real founder of the Vākāṭaka kingdom, which was a single entity until his death. His two sons, Sarvaṣeṇa I and Rudraṣeṇa I, were initially the viceroys of the expanded kingdom. After the death of Pravaraṣeṇa I, they went their separate ways, retaining the earlier branches as sovereign states with capitals at Nandivardhana (modern Nanded) and Vatsagulma (modern Wāshim), respectively. The former is often called the main branch. After the division, the rulers of both dynastic branches signed their inscriptions as 'Maharajas of the Vākāṭakas', thus demonstrating their relationship as well as their mutual independence. Rudraṣeṇa II married the Gupta princess, Prabhāvatigupta, who had a long reign as a dowager queen. Their son, Pravaraṣeṇa II, had an even longer reign and strengthened the branch

(Nandivardhana) to such an extent that the Vatasagulma branch temporarily appeared as a subsidiary.

Gradually, the Vatsagulma branch appears to have had a temporary predominance over the Nandivardhana branch during the reign of Hariṣeṇa in late fifth century, as is learnt from his minister Varāhadeva's dedicatory inscription in Cave 16 Ajantā, where Hariṣeṇa has been praised for having subdued seven kingdoms in central India. The Mandhal inscription indicates that Prthiviṣeṇa II (of Nandivardhana branch) (*ca.* 478–495 CE) may have been a temporary victim of Hariṣeṇa's expansionist policy. However, even in periods of predominance of one of the two kingdoms, none of them appears to have never thought of extinguishing their temporarily subordinate relatives.

A view is now emerging to call the Nandivardhana branch and their dominion as the Eastern Vākāṭaka kingdom, and the Vatsagulma branch and their dominion as the Western Vākāṭaka kingdom. While the Eastern Vākāṭakas are known for their Hindu temple sanctuaries at Rāmagiri (Rāmṭek hill)—thanks to recent excavations, finds, and research—the Western Vākāṭakas are often recognised for their tolerant approach to Buddhism, resulting in the creation of the later phase of the Ajantā caves, and those at Ghaṭotkacha, Banoṭi, Bāgh and Aurangabad. Traces of artistic and iconographic influences of the Eastern Vākāṭakas can be seen in Ajantā. At the same time, the

material of the Western Vākāṭakas articulates a very different language from their eastern relatives. The greatness of these two dynastically related Vākāṭaka kingdoms lay in their distinct cultural identities, which they promoted systematically during their rule, without ever trying to impose them on their relatives during periods of temporary predominance.

The Vākāṭakas did not follow a hierarchized administrative apparatus, as was the norm for their predecessors, the Sātavāhanas, in the region, or for their contemporary neighbours in the north, the once powerful and matrimonially allied Gupta rulers. A stratified feudal system had not yet taken concrete shape. Feudal lords, otherwise called *sāmantas*, are seldom found in the records. Instead, the heads of smaller provinces, which were either defeated in war or had accepted subsidiary positions, were able to retain the epithet of 'rājā,' as seen in inscriptions.

Even more surprisingly, the Vākāṭaka kings neither appear to have minted any gold coins nor established an era of their own. K. M. Shrimali has suggested that de-urbanisation in favour of the rural and agrarian economy was responsible for the lack of an exclusive coinage system. Use of foreign currency was probably allowed in their realm, at a time when, according to Ajay Mitra Shastri and Ellen M. Raven (H. Bakker

2004), the Vākāṭakas were still experimenting with minting copper coins and trying to set up their own monetary system.

HARIṢEṆA'S LIKELY ROLE IN THE RENAISSANCE OF AJANTĀ

As we shall see in chapter 11, Cave 8 was probably the first *upāśraya* to have been initiated in the fifth-century phase of Ajantā; and it was conceived as a residential *upāśraya* with a small hall, which was obviously to cater to the needs of the Sātavāhana-period *ćaityagṛhas* (Caves 9 and 10). Soon, Caves 11, 7, 6 Lower, and 16 were initiated as residential halls, which are all flanking the Sātavāhana-period *ćaityagṛhas* precisely because these too were begun as functional annexe to the *ćaityagṛhas*. The *ćaityagṛhas* were the places of worship hitherto. The *upāśrayas* or upāśrayas were only dwelling units at the time when they were started (Tables 6-7). The excavation of so many *upāśrayas* or indicate that there must have been a rising need of several dormitories; there must also have been increase in funds for the new projects. Large number of monks were expected to be dwelling at the site. The older *ćaityagṛhas* must have been witnessing exceeding number of pilgrims, merchants, monks, and the *upāsakas*. The renaissance of the site could not obviously have taken place without extraordinarily favourable conditions, such as the political conditions, social conditions, and economic conditions. During the fourth and

fifth centuries, there were building activities on other sites too, but not to the scale and measure as seen at Ajantā. Compare, for example, the *saṅghārāmas* at Kanherī, Karle, Bhaja, Junnar, Karad, Kondvite, Pitalkhora, Amravati, Sanchi, Goli, Sannati, Nagarjunakonda, Sanghol, etc. which did not receive as much resurgent activities as Ajantā in the fifth century. Thus, it is here that the revival of rock-cut architecture was re-kindled with full vigour.

One is tempted, therefore, to deduce that the renaissance of Ajantā creadled by the liberal atmosphere, which might have likely prevailed under the rule of Hariṣeṇa who was a Vaiṣṇavite and Śaivite, and who has been eulogised in at least three Ajantā inscriptions. Although the Vākāṭakas were ruling the region for nearly two centuries, but no evidence of patronage to the Buddhist faith has become known. It was only during the reign of Hariṣeṇa that the site came to life; and the in-situ evidence suggest strongly that the site was abandoned as soon as Hariṣeṇa died in circa 477 CE. Therefore, Spink's thesis that the developments at Ajantā started soon after Hariṣeṇa's accession to the throne in around circa 460 CE seems very convincing (Figure 225). Apparently, the moment he came to the throne, the plans for the creations of new *upāśrayas* at Ajantā seem to have been started speedily. Perhaps the Buddhists had never found the same support earlier.

WAS HARIṢEṆA A RĀJĀ OR MAHĀRĀJĀ?

Whether the Vākāṭaka rulers of the fifth century should be called *rājā*, *mahārājā*, or emperor deserves brief discussion. It is well known that there were many janapadas in ancient India known by various names such as Mūlaka, Aśmaka, Lāṭa, Kalinga, Kośal, Gandhara, Matsya, Anga, Vanga, Chola, etc. These *janapadas* were also known as 'countries'. From time to time, they enjoyed independent status, but often they came under the suzerainty of other mighty rulers. Thus, there were times when rulers ruled over more than one *janapada*. Often the ruler of a *janapada* was forced to accept the suzerainty of another ruler: thus, the greater king was called *mahārājā*. The appellation maharaja is also found in Vākāṭaka inscriptions. It certainly designates a higher status of the maharajas whose kingdom encompassed many countries. Thus, Hariṣeṇa was *mahārājā* while Upendragupta II or Dharādhipa was the raja of Ṛṣika country (southern Khāndesh region).

IN DEFENSE OF SPINK'S THEORY

Spink is of the view that Ajantā Cave 1 was patronised by Maharaja Hariṣeṇa (W. M. Spink 1981). The basis of his argument rests upon the on-site data and their analysis. However, there is no direct or epigraphic evidence to suggest that the Vākāṭakas were directly involved with the Ajantā

excavations. It is a point, however, to be noted that Hariṣeṇa's minister, Varāhadeva, was the donor of Ajantā Cave 16 (Figures 128-132) and the Ghaṭotkacha cave (Figure 215), some 35 kilometres west-southwest, as the crow flies. His donative inscriptions mention the rule of Hariṣeṇa. He was probably a Buddhist or a Buddhist *upāsaka*. The inscription of Caves 17 and 20, read with other inscriptions, suggest that these caves were donated by Upendra [gupta II] or Dharādhipa? (Figures 137-139), the local king of Ṛṣika *janapada* (province), where Ajantā was located (Figures 8-11). His inscription also mentions the rule of Hariṣeṇa. Thus, the fact that the caves of Ajantā were excavated during the reign of Hariṣeṇa is unquestionable.

Many Indian historians tend to question Spink's proposal that all the caves of the second phase of Ajantā were begun and brought to the present state during and within the reign of Hariṣeṇa (Figure 225). The critics overlook the inscriptional evidence that do not suggest the involvement of multiple generations of donors in the excavation of the edifice. They unequivocally ascribe authorship to an individual. Thus, there should be no confusion over whether the caves, no matter how complex they appear, were excavated within the 'working' lifetime of the respective donors. If we concede this, and consider the on-site evidence, we will have no difficulty in agreeing with the leading scholar, Walter M.

Spink's view that the caves were excavated in a span of 18 years or so, i.e. from circa 462 CE to circa 480 CE. I have examined Spink's data and found that there is merit in his description of the caves. Therefore, I have accepted Spink's timeframe (c. 462-477 CE) for Ajantā's second phase. Below, I have summarised the main ideas of Spink.

Hariṣeṇa's reign facilitated the later phase of development at Ajantā. A number of caves were planned and started together, but they suffered interruptions due to economic recession and conflicts that kept afflicting the region.

Ajantā lay in the Ṛṣika 'country' ruled by a feudatory of Vākāṭaka Maharaja Hariṣeṇa. The maharaja began his reign from circa 460 CE and died suddenly in circa 477 CE, leaving behind an inept son, who failed to quash a rebellion by a feudal king of the Aśmaka *janapada*. These problems affected the development and patronage of the site in a significant way, which can be seen in every cave at Ajantā. The kingdom disintegrated by the end of fifth century. The gist of Spink's theory and chronological framework is summarised below:

Circa 462–468 CE. Buddhist rock-cut architecture revives after many centuries of lull, for no major examples are seen in earlier centuries. The revival is possible due to Hariṣeṇa's tolerant approach. As opposed to collective

patronage of the Sātavāhana period caves, the patronage now is individual. Known donors are Upendra [gupta II], the local king of the Ṛṣika (Khāndesh) *janapada* wherein Ajantā lay; the Aśmakarājā whose name is lost. He sponsored Caves 17, 18, 19, 20, and 29. The name of this king is not known, but his 'friend since many previous births,' monk Buddhabhadra, sponsored Caves 21, 23, 24, 25, 26-complex, and 27. Varāhadeva, Hariṣeṇa's prime minister, sponsored Cave 16 and Ghaṭotkacha Cave. All the fifth-century caves, except Caves 3, 22, 28, and 29, began during *ca.* 462–464 CE. The almost simultaneous launch of so many of the intricately designed architectural marvels could not have begun without adequate pre-planning and some kind of inter-coordination amongst the donors or sects involved. If so, it would have required some time before the actual excavations began. Such planning, therefore, must have begun at least a few years earlier. It would hence come close to the year of Hariṣeṇa's accession to the throne in circa 460 CE.

Circa 469–471 CE. This is a period of recession, resulting in slow patronage.[2] This is because of the outbreak of a conflict between the Ṛṣika and Aśmaka *janapadas*. Strangely, Maharaja Hariṣeṇa does not intervene. Work in all the caves stops except in those of the local king, Upendragupta's, and Cave 1. Workers migrate to Bāgh in search of work. Bāgh lay in Anūpa *janapada*, where a son of Hariṣeṇa

was an imperial viceroy. Spink now says that Bāgh pre-dates Ajantā.

Circa 472 CE. This is a hiatus period caused by the on-going conflict. This time, the conflict escalates into a full-blown war due to the increasing territorial ambitions of the Aśmaka king. All work at Ajantā stops except in the Emperor's Cave 1. In spite of the hiatus in work, no unplanned images are carved, suggesting that the donors are still in. The conflict ends in favour of the Aśmakas.

Circa 473–477 CE. Work resumes in all caves of the Aśmakas and progresses expediently. The period ends with Hariṣeṇa's unexpected death or murder. Hariṣeṇa's son is inept as a ruler, notorious for his excesses and vices. The kingdom collapses following widespread anarchy. In fear, the patrons are forced to flee together from the site. However, before fleeing, they try to complete the main Buddha image and dedicate the same for worship even as many areas of various edifices remain incomplete.

Circa 478–480 CE. This is the period of disruption for the kingdom and the site. After the exodus of the original patrons, some 'uninvited' people make use of the abandoned caves and carve or paint images wherever they find an empty space in a good location, ostensibly to earn *puṇya* (religious merit) for themselves. These impromptu figures are called 'intrusive' by Spink, since they intrude upon the scheme of

the monument in utter disrespect of the original design. Eventually, even these opportunists are forced to flee from the site, sending Ajantā into a long spell of seclusion.

ṚṢĪKA AND AŚMAKA JANAPADAS

Upendragupta II claims in his Cave 17 inscription that he had 'subjugated' such countries as Aśmaka (Ahmadnagar and Beeḍ districts of Maharashtra). However, the donative inscription of Cave 26 eulogises the greatness of the Aśmaka king, which indicates that by the time Cave 26's inscription was done, the Aśmaka king or Upendragupta II was back in power. Interestingly, this inscription omits the mention of the Vākāṭaka overlords, by which Spink infers that Hariṣeṇa may have passed away; the dynasty had already crept into political decline. Thus, Spink constructs that the Emperor Hariṣeṇa must have died around the year 477 CE.

The conflicts between the Ṛṣika and Aśmaka *janapadas*, as deduced from the inscriptions, did not deter a donor like Buddhabhadra from donating caves in a *saṅghārāma* located in a rival region of the Ṛṣika even though he was 'friend with the prime minister of the Aśmakarājā since many previous births.'

It seems that there were two conflicts. In the first, the Ṛṣikas (Upendragupta II) seems to have won, as claimed in Cave 17's inscription. In the second, the Aśmaka King seems to

have won, as inferred from the combined evidence of the Cave 26 inscription and gradual development pattern. In the second war, the site came under the control of the Aśmaka king. Notably, both were under the control of the Vākāṭaka Emperor Hariṣeṇa.

Spink has proposed that when the Aśmakas became powerful with their newly gained territories, they forged an alliance with other *janapadas* and countries and toppled the Vākāṭaka house whose feudatories they were. It is for this reason that Buddhabhadra, the donor of Cave 26, who eulogised the Aśmakas, totally omits the mention of the Vākāṭakas. It appears then that Buddhabhadra's inscription was incised after the death of Hariṣeṇa, the most important ruler from the angle of Ajantā.