

CH. 6: Interrogating 'Hīnayāna' and 'Mahāyāna'

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'HĪNAYĀNA' AND 'MAHĀYĀNA' TERMS ARE INAPPLICABLE TO AJANTĀ

THE BUDDHISM of the fifth-century phase of Ajantā is a vexed issue. Scholars have tried to describe it in different ways, but none so far has presented a satisfactory and credible picture of the people and their sectarian affiliations. The majority of the observations have been made based on textual sources or archaeological sources of other regions or eras. It appears that the correct picture of Ajantā's Buddhism has never been described. In fact, incorrect and fallacious constructs have been made, based largely on assumptions and conventional notions. Those relying solely on textual sources have assumed that the contents of Buddhist sources reflect pan-pervasive phenomena prevailing equally through the subcontinent across many centuries. This assumption disregards the local and regional variations that the religions of India always display. What appears truer today

is that the makers of Ajantā would have hardly agreed with the scholars of today.

Conventionally, the caves have been described as 'Hīnayāna' (Lesser Vehicle) or 'Mahāyāna' (Greater Vehicle). The word Hīnayāna was obviously used by the proponents of the Mahāyāna faith, who, we like to believe, looked down upon the Hīnayānists. If that is true, Ajantā's Mahāyānists should not have made temples with stūpas, as did the Hīnayānists. The fact that the fifth-century makers of Ajantā (and even Ellora) made stūpa temples (Figure 152) just as did the Hīnayānists ought to have prevented us from drawing the contrasts as we have done through the last two centuries of scholarship. We have clearly been reading more than looking; as a result, we have floated outlandish notions about the makers of Ajantā and their theological inclinations and affiliations.

The planning and inauguration of as many as 17 caves, a vast majority of them being purely residential *upāśrayas*, e.g. Caves 8, 11, 7, 6L and 16, which were conceived as residential adjuncts or annexe to the Sātavāhana-period caves indicate that the makers of the fifth-century phase of Ajantā most certainly had no problem with the stupas or the worshippers of the Sātavāhana-period caves (Tables 6-10).

The fact that stupas were planned for the fifth-century stupa temples (Caves 26 and 19), and evidently without any

prior plan for the fronting images on the stupas, strongly indicate that the makers and the monks for whom they were intended would not at all have agreed to our much too well-established theory of the Hīnayāna-Mahāyāna dichotomy and antagonistic theories. If they were 'Mahāyānists' as we like to call them, and if they had any specific predilection for the image and disenchantment with the stupa we would have found them initiating Buddha shrines from the very beginning. The researches by Spink and the present scholar prove beyond a shred of doubt that all the *maṇḍapas* of the fifth-century period were conceived and developed as mere residential halls in c. 461-462 CE. The Buddha shrine was introduced in them after circa 466 CE (Table 4).

We need to ask why the stūpas were being excavated, built, and worshipped during the fifth-century phase of Ajantā, and even later at Aurangabad and Ellora. Numerous examples of painted or sculpted stūpas are found in a majority of the fifth-century caves of Ajantā. They were created even during what Spink calls the 'Period of Disruption,' i.e. after the site had collapsed and the original patrons had fled away from the scene through circa 478 to 480 CE (W. M. Spink 2005). Around the doorjambs, on the door lintels, in the square brackets of the pillar capitals, on top of Cave 7's portico (Figure 82), stūpas were carved, not merely as decorative motifs, but as objects of

veneration. There are a large number of painted scenes and narratives where the stūpa is shown being worshipped, and these are not only in the so-called Hīnayāna caves, but also in the so-called Mahāyāna caves. What is most striking is that there were attempts to carve stūpas behind the main Buddha images in the shrines of Caves 1 and 11 (Figures 119-120), a fact that has never so far been noted in published literature.

At times, instead of Hīnayāna, the terms 'Theravāda' or 'monastic Buddhism' are used. Even these are far from realistic representations, for there were at least 18 schools of early Buddhism, Theravāda being one of them (Table 5). Finding a better term for the 'early Buddhism'—that is from the time of the Buddha to the beginning of the so-called Mahāyāna (generally emplaced around the centuries near the start of the Common Era)—remains a problem. The linear model of history saw radical transformations in Mahāyāna and identified it as a periodic successor to Hīnayāna. It construed a history where Mahāyāna replaced Hīnayāna. Now, we know that this is just not true. Gregory Schopen, a leading Buddhist scholar writes:

The emergence of the Mahāyāna was a far more complicated affair than the linear model allowed, and 'Early' Buddhism or Hīnayāna or what some now call—perhaps correctly—mainstream Buddhism, not only persisted, but also prospered, long after the beginning of the Common Era. [(Schopen 2004)]

The differences between actual historical Mahāyāna and pre-Mahāyāna communities have not been conclusively determined. The records of early Chinese travellers in India suggest that both functioned equally as communities of monks, sometimes even including members of the same *nikāya* (division, section, class, or order).

THE MAINSTREAM BUDDHIST SCHOOLS

When the first schism of the *Saṅgha* took place about a century after the death of the Buddha, there occurred the separation of the Mahāsaṅghikā School or 'Those of the Great Community.' The remaining ones were referred to as *Sthāvira* or the 'Elders.' The *Sthāvira* and Mahāsaṅghikā branches had many groups of schools and sub-schools. The table ahead shows the mainstream schools of Buddhism. It is within this Taxonomy that we shall have to locate the Buddhists of Ajantā. We should simply describe them, as were followers of the mainstream schools (Table 5), because we simply do not know to which school they belonged. Even the inscriptions are not helping us in this regard.

IS THERE A MAHĀYĀNA AT AJANTĀ?

About Mahāyāna, I can do no more than refer the reader to Gregory Schopen whose views on Mahāyāna seem perfect for explaining the fifth-century context of Ajantā. He observes:

Textual sources placed the beginning of Mahāyāna in the second century CE with the first translation of Lokakṣema's *Sukhāvativyuha Sūtra*, central to the Mahāyānists. The translation anticipates an earlier date of the Indian original ascribable to the beginning of the Common Era. The evidences outside of the textual corpus, however, do not corroborate the conclusion that Mahāyāna started around the beginning of the Common Era. The principal reason is the utter deficit of inscriptional and archaeological records in support of such a conclusion. There is just one isolated inscription and an image depicting Amitābha, the deity most central to Mahāyāna, during the whole period of five centuries after the Common Era. The extensive body of inscriptions from virtually all parts of India do not make any mention of Mahāyāna until fifth century. These records document the religious aspirations and activities of Buddhist communities throughout the period at sites all across the Indian landscape, and they contain scores of references to named Buddhist groups and 'schools' that were used to be called 'Hīnayāna' groups—the Sarvastivādins, the Mahāsaṅghikas, the Cetiya, and so on. From this point of view, at least, this was not 'the period of the Mahāyāna,' but 'the period of the Hīnayāna.' Moreover, it is the religious aspirations and goals of the Hīnayāna that are expressed in these documents, not those of a Mahāyāna. Even in art and archaeological corpus, until the fifth century, does not show Mahāyāna Buddhas like Amitābha or Akṣobhya but Buddha Śākyamūni who everywhere remains the focus of attention. It appears then that while the texts were constructing, defining, debating competing versions of Mahāyāna, and articulating Mahāyāna

ideas and aspirations, it was the older ideas and aspirations that seem to have been motivating actual behaviour, at least in India; the old and established Hīnayāna groups were the only ones that seem to have been patronised and supported. The earliest characterization of Mahāyāna and historical development seems to have taken place outside India, in China where the Mahāyāna aspiration for Sukhāvati (Pure Land) is unequivocally expressed. Another historical misrepresentation is that Mahāyāna is lay oriented, which was the main propelling factor against strict monasticism of Hīnayāna. 'It is, in fact, becoming increasingly clear that far from being closed or cut off from the lay world, monastic, Hīnayāna Buddhism—especially in its Indian, Sanskrit forms—was, very much like medieval Christian monasticism, deeply embedded in and concerned with the lay world, much of its program being in fact intended and designed to allow laymen and women and donors the opportunity and means to make religious merit. This in many ways remains the function of monastic Buddhism even today in modern Theravāda countries. . . . At this point we can only postulate that the Mahāyāna may have had a visible impact in India only when, in the fifth century, it had become what it had originally most strongly objected to: a fully landed, sedentary, lay-oriented monastic institution—the first mention of the Mahāyāna in an Indian inscription occurs, in fact, in the record of a large grant of land to a Mahāyāna monastery. In the meantime, the Mahāyāna may well have been either a collection of marginalized ascetic groups living in the forest, or groups of belligerent and disgruntled conservatives embedded in mainstream, socially engaged monasteries, all of whom continued pouring out pamphlets espousing their views and values, pamphlets that we now know as Mahāyāna sūtras. . . . The earliest Mahāyāna text, Saddharmapundarika-Sūtra (The Lotus Sūtra), is datable to ca. 268-232 BCE. Around ca. 200 CE the philosopher and scholar Nāgārjuna writes about śūnyatā (emptiness), establishing the Madhyamika School (the Middle Way).

Thus, differing scholarly opinions attempt to locate the origin of Mahāyāna variously within the confines of a particular mainstream Buddhist doctrinal school, in ascetic movements within mainstream Buddhist monasteries, or among lay religious practitioners. Although it is doubtful that any particular mainstream Buddhist school can lay claim to the Mahāyāna, it is clear that later Mahāyāna practitioners adopted the monastic disciplinary codes of mainstream Buddhist schools. Further, key doctrinal positions later associated with Mahāyāna can be traced to mainstream Buddhist doctrinal works: for example, the religious ideal of the Bodhisattva; the six pāramitā (perfections) that are the cornerstone of Mahāyāna religious praxis; the theory of multiple forms of the Buddha; and a fundamental, subtle form of thought.

It is in the literature of the latter, in fact, particularly in its vinaya and avadāna literatures, that the origin tales, the promotion, and the religious ideology of both the stūpa cult and the cult of images occur, not in Mahāyāna Sūtras—if they refer to either it is at least clear that they take both as already established cult forms, and are in fact reacting to them, at first, at least, by attempting to deflect attention away from them and toward something very different. This attempt is most commonly articulated in passages that assert—to paraphrase—that it is good to fill the world with stūpas made of precious substances, and to worship them with all sorts of perfumes, incenses, and so on, but it is far and away, in fact infinitely, better and more meritorious to take up even a four-line verse of the doctrine, preserve it, recite it, teach it and—eventually, it now seems—write or copy it. Virtually the same assertion, using virtually the same language, is made in regard to religious giving—it is good to fill the whole world with jewels and give it as a gift to the Buddha, but it is far and away superior to take up, study and instantiate even a small part of the doctrine, or some practice, or a text. This, for example, is a

constant refrain in the Diamond Sūtra (Vajracchedikā). [
(Schopen 2004)]