

CH. 7: Ajantā: a *saṅghārāma* without the *Saṅgha*?

HOW COULD THERE be a *saṅghārāma* without the presence of the Saṅgha? The question is raised here because a strange tendency is observed in the literature on the subject. There is no work until the date that has ventured to explore the role of the Saṅgha at the *saṅghārāma* of Ajantā.

True, there is no inscriptional record that leads us in this direction. However, simply because there is no inscriptional record can we conclude that there can be a *saṅghārāma* like Ajanta without the involvement of the Saṅgha?

Perhaps a detailed and meticulous study of on-site data may help us in the direction. This would entail the study of the plans of the caves, and how they developed across time. Our study has revealed, after the revolutionary study of Walter M. Spink, that the majority of the fifth century caves of Ajantā were not only planned together but also begun together within a span of few years (Figure 225). They seem to have faced similar working situations and problems; together they explored new ideas and opportunities; for major problems, they found solutions together; they also learned

from each other' mistakes. If a new, attractive, and practical idea was introduced in a cave, it was soon adopted in other caves. All this created a pattern that became the hallmark of artistic and architectural evolution of Ajantā, especially during the fifth-century phase. Spink has shown that it is possible to trace the history of motifs and style from one cave to another, including the history of problems and solutions, and how similar situations and solutions affected a range of caves.

Many of the caves display the tendency of orchestrated developments. Things were not just dependent on the donor. It appears that the site was managed by an authority that was superior to the donors. Such an authority must have been the *Saṅgha*, one of the *tri-ratnas* (the Three Jewels), the other two being the Buddha and the Dharma.

Contrary to Spink's argument, the present researcher holds that the donors apparently had limited say on the designing of the caves. The planning and designing—from the drawing board to the dedication and worship activities—seem to this researcher to have been supervised by the *Saṅgha*. It is also possible that the skilled and unskilled workforce came from the pool of the monks rather than hired workers on wages. In the *Cūlavagga* (Pali canon), the Buddha asked the monks to undertake the task of building temples and *vihāras*. Thus, for the excavation work, iconographic schemes, and

aesthetic embellishments the monks themselves must have come forward. Thus, the *Saṅgha* cannot be imagined to have been abstained from the scene of a place of such a renaissance.

The following are the factors that impel us to think in the direction of the *Saṅgha*. The simultaneous planning of the majority of fifth-century caves, the uniformity of initial floor plans, and the synchronous development of many caves point out that the caves were likely supervised by a higher authority like the *Saṅgha*. The donor's job could largely have been to 'sign the cheque.' The *Saṅgha* has always been a 'ritual receiver of gifts.' In turn, it promises the donors, within a mechanism of gift exchange, a place in paradise or at least in history. It did so by allowing the concerned donors to emplace donative inscriptions in lieu of the gift received. Such donative records on the '*kirtti*' (monument) promised (and more so in the case of a rock-cut monument) a lasting place in the heavens. A passage in the donating inscription of Cave 26 perhaps alludes to this very belief:

Even a single flower offered to whom [the Buddha] yields the fruit known as paradise (and even) final emancipation (verse 3).

A man continues to enjoy himself in paradise as long as his memory is green in the world. One should (therefore) set up a memorial on the mountains that will endure for as long as the moon and the sun continue (verse 8).

Other inscriptions incised by other donors on the site, e.g. that of Mathurā (patron of Cave 4), Varāhadeva (patron of Caves 16 and Ghaṭotkacha *vihāra*), and Upendra [gupta II] (patron of Ajanta Caves 17 to 20) all indirectly refer to a superior authority like the *Saṅgha*.

Had the site been completed fully it would have required an authority that would manage the day-to-day affairs of the monastery. The donors would not be the ones to manage the affairs. If there is anything that is constant in Buddhism across time and space, it is the *tri-ratnas* (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the *Saṅgha*). Even at Ajantā, the *tri-ratnas* have been depicted variously. It is likely that under the favourable rule of Hariṣeṇa, the *Saṅgha* sent out a call for patronage. Consequently, a number of known patrons like Varāhadeva, Buddhābhadda, Upendra [gupta II], and Mathura came forward and made religious donations in the form of funding the *maṇḍapas* and *śaitya* temples.

We shall see in chapter 10 that there was one plan on the drawing board for a majority of the *upāśrayas* (Table 6). Only later, during the course of development, distinctions in decorative and iconographic schemes were planned. The earliest *maṇḍapas* in fact had nothing unique. They were basic and simple, based on the earlier prototypes seen at Ajantā or elsewhere in the earlier periods. There were little 'creative' facets. For example, a standard floor plan was

devised for all the residential *maṇḍapas*. The variations seen today are the results of gradual evolution. If we remove the role of the *Saṅgha*, we would be hard-pressed to explain how a majority of the caves could begin together within a span of few years (*ca.* 462–464 CE), how so many patrons could suddenly come together, how the initial plans of the majority of the *maṇḍapas* and stūpa temples were made identical. The pace of development was also orchestrated. New ideas and motifs were shared together. These are some of the reasons to infer the presence of the *Saṅgha* on the site.