

## Ch. 8: Some grey areas in fixing the date of the Vākāṭaka phase of the Ajantā caves

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### INTRODUCTION

THIS ESSAY is a work of historiography, which attempts to investigate afresh some of the vital points in dating the Ajantā caves of the Vākāṭaka period.<sup>3</sup> The need for the task has arisen from the fact that differing dates are ascribed in the literature on the subject, the latest being that of Walter M. Spink (W. M. Spink 2007, fig. 39). His research is widely noted for some radical conclusions. There are issues,

however, that require reconsideration, more so because some scholars have disputed Spink's conclusions. If the latest research in epigraphy like those by Ajay Mitra Shāstrī and Brahmanand Deshpande were found acceptable, some fundamentals of Spink's postulations would be rendered untenable. I do not know of anyone in recent decades who has worked as extensively on the dating problem of Ajantā as Spink. That is why any exploration of the antiquity of Ajantā would invariably involve references to Spink's numerous works.

### THE DEBATE

Ajantā caves have been dated in various ways since their rediscovery in around 1819. Initially many centuries were ascribed. Some three phases were ascribed to the entire excavations. James Fergusson (1880, 283-85, 320 f.) and James Burgess (1883, 43-45, 47-48) classified the caves in three groups:

<b>Group I</b>	Hīnayāna period	2 <sup>nd</sup> c. BCE – 1 <sup>st</sup> c. CE	Caves 8-13
<b>Group II</b>	Mahāyāna period	500 CE – 600 CE	Caves 6, 7, 16-20
<b>Group III</b>	Mahāyāna period	600 CE – 680 CE	Caves 1-5, 21-27

Caves 8 and 11 were included in the 'Hīnayāna' group.<sup>4</sup> Caves 28 and 29, still inaccessible, have been neglected by

scholars with the only exception of Spink who has studied them in detail (W. M. Spink 2007, 342-48).

Owing to the sluggish pace of fresh research, the dating of Fergusson and Burgess continued to hold authority until mid-twentieth century in the mainstream research, albeit the official version of Ajantā's history still propagates the dating by Fergusson and Burgess. During the second and third quarter of the last century the probing by D. C. Sircār (1954), A. S. Ālṭekar (1946), and Gulam Yāzdānī (1946) brought a new wave of understanding about the Vākāṭakas and the historical geography of their rule. The real breakthrough came with the arrival of V. V. Mirāshī on the scene whose magnum opus, *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas* (1963) and many papers on the related theme including the very crucial 'Historical Data in Daṇḍīn's *Daśakumāraśarita*' – (1945) and (1960) – elevated the level of debate to a new stage.

The new stage anchored many new thinkers including Spink (1976-1977) and Shāstrī (1987) whose early works (although out-dated now) gave new directions to the debate. Thus our understanding about the Vākāṭaka history was further refined. Subsequently, Karl Khanḍālāvālā<sup>5</sup>, Brahmānanda Deshpāṇḍe<sup>6</sup>, Richard Scott Cohen<sup>7</sup>, and Hans T. Bakker<sup>8</sup> further intensified the debate by probing on a number of finer topics and controversial areas while presenting their own radical viewpoints based on re-reading and re-discovery of new

epigraphic and archaeological material. Spink authored a number of essays in the course of his four decades of intensive research.<sup>9</sup> His latest ideas are included in a multi-volume work (W. M. Spink 2005-2013). Spink believes that all of the non-Sātavāhana caves of Ajantā were excavated within a period of eighteen years ranging from circa 462 CE to circa 480 CE.<sup>10</sup>

Although it was always known since the earliest translations of the Ajantā inscriptions that the name of the ruling king, named Hariṣeṇa is mentioned therein, somehow the earlier scholars writing on the history of Ajantā never took a serious note of such references. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the epigraphic references to this king started receiving more attention, and became the focus of the debate. The attempt was to learn about the connection of Hariṣeṇa with Ajantā, and what final date could be ascribed to the caves if the reign of Hariṣeṇa could somehow be settled. Thus, finding the reign of Hariṣeṇa became indeed the key to solving the period of the later phase of Ajantā.

On the above issue, currently there exist two main theories. As per the first, all the non-Sātavāhana-period caves were excavated within the framework of the rule of Hariṣeṇa. This view is propounded by Spink, which got rapid attention but slow acceptance. Literature survey can show that the following scholars tended to accept, or have

accepted in general terms, the broader ideas of Spink: Sheila L. Weiner (1977), M. K. Dhavalikar (1984) (1992), A. P. Jāmkhedkar (1991), and Cohen (1995).

Apart from Spink, there is a line of thinking that reasons that so many caves, and so exquisitely executed, designed, and developed would must certainly have taken longer than a king's reign. This school of thought postulates that the developments at Ajantā continued well beyond the reign of Hariṣeṇa. Some even believe that the period stretched up to the successors of the Vākāṭakas, although which successors we are not told. The view had taken root in the earliest of the writings: (Fergusson and Burgess 1880), (Burgess 1883, 47-48). In recent times the followers of this school of thought are, inter alia, Joana Williams<sup>11</sup>, Khandālāvālā<sup>12</sup>, Bakker (1992, 36-42, 89), Shāstrī (1997, 203-05, 209-12), and Deshpānde<sup>13</sup>.

#### *Hariṣeṇa's Reign and Spink's 'Short Chronology'*

Hariṣeṇa's reign is indeed controversial. The king is mentioned in the epigraphs of Ajantā caves 16 and 17, and the Ghaṭotkacha Cave.<sup>14</sup> We know him also from several grants, coinage, and stone inscriptions. The various dates attributed to Hariṣeṇa's reign are:<sup>15</sup>

1. 500 CE-520 CE (Burgess 1883, 53, 128)

2. Circa 475 CE-circa 510 CE (Altekar 1946, 121) and (Dhavalikar 1984)
3. 475-500 CE (Sircar 1954, 177 ff., 724), (Mirashi 1963, vi)
4. Circa 480 CE-510 CE (Shastri 1997, 212)
5. 460 CE-478 CE (W. M. Spink 2005) and (H. T. Bakker 1992, 34, 170)

Out of the above, Spink's dating has received the most attention and has been the most controversial. His ideas are based on inter-disciplinary approach because Spink realises taking into account the disperse evidence across several domains that none of the disciplines, such as epigraphy, archaeology, Indology, or art history can solve the issue alone. There is a need, therefore, for cross-disciplinary approach, as there is a bit of evidence in each of these domains, and one must relate them all together to make a holistic understanding. The most radical contribution made by Spink is by taking into account the on-site archaeological data that was never earlier documented or analysed systematically and microscopically. Spink also takes into consideration a crucial piece of contemporary literature, namely, *Daśakumāra-carita* (Ryder 1927) by Daṇḍīn who was a seventh-century prose writer and aesthetician.

Within the corpus of epigraphy, the crucial Hisse-Borala inscription and Bārwanī copper plate provide Spink with '*terminus ante quem*' and '*terminus post-quem*' for Hariṣeṇa's reign and the connected developments of the fifth-century

phase of the Ajantā caves. Since the plates mention the rule of successor kings in the regions that were ruled by Hariṣeṇa, the reign of these other kings would have to be dated subsequent to Hariṣeṇa's reign. Relating to other inscriptions and available historical data Spink has proposed the reign of Hariṣeṇa from circa 460 CE to circa 478 CE.

We should now like to present a summary of Spink's reconstructions given in his numerous papers albeit his latest versions containing much revision are contained in the series of volumes (W. M. Spink 2005-2013). For Spink, Hariṣeṇa's reign and Ajantā's development in fifth century nearly correspond to each other. The life of the king affected the development of Ajantā and surrounding political circumstances. The ancient name of the province where Ajantā is situated was known as Ṛṣika (Figures 8, 11). It was a small *janapada* like dozens of others in ancient India. It had a king of its own. From time to time, this king owed allegiance or subordination to a maharaja that ruled over larger domains controlling many *janapadas*. Therefore, it was that this *janapada* in the middle and late fifth century was being ruled by King Upendragupta [II] who patronised Ajantā caves 17, 18, 19, and 20. Upendragupta [II] was subordinate to Maharaja Hariṣeṇa who ruled over a much larger territory ranging from the eastern, central, and western India: "from sea to sea." Spink therefore calls Maharaja Hariṣeṇa as

'emperor.' It was after Hariṣeṇa's accession to the throne (c. 460 CE) that the latter phase of Ajantā began. Spink says that Hariṣeṇa himself was involved in the renaissance of Ajantā, and the plans, layout, designs and everything else was being prepared and directed from inside the royal court of Hariṣeṇa. That is why on the death of Hariṣeṇa around circa 477 CE every development at Ajantā was adversely affected, and within a year or two, the site was abandoned in the aftermath of the resulting empire-wide chaos.

Thus, the latter course of development at Ajantā was as rapid and frenzied as to fall within the very short period of eighteen years (c. 462 - c. 480 CE). The most 'complete' Cave 1 was patronised directly by Hariṣeṇa (W. M. Spink 1981). A dedicatory inscription was intended for it but could never be actually incised due to the sudden death of Hariṣeṇa. After the emperor's death, his son Sarvaṣeṇa proved to be inept and could not hold the empire intact. An insurrection by an alliance of subordinate kings overthrew the successor's rule, and rapidly the Vākāṭakas were eclipsed by historical forces. The destructive political climate drained the resources and peaceful climate needed for Ajantā's development. Soon after Hariṣeṇa's death, the site was abandoned by the makers. No one then visited Ajantā for a thousand and half century.

In my detailed in-situ studies I was able to find much of the evidence cited by Spink and upon their independent



analysis I came to the same conclusion that the entire latter phase of the site's development should span no longer than two decades. I was compelled to accept Spink's 'short chronology'. I was also able to see that there was a synchronic development through the caves, that they began in a certain moment of time (c. 461 CE, in my view), and exchanged ideas in the course of development. One can trace the history and exchange of such ideas from year to year, cave by cave through a deductive analysis. I was also able to find that there was a period of lull at the site when there is a breakage of work seen in most of the fifth-century caves. This breakage of work is described as 'hiatus' (circa 472 CE) by Spink. However, before the hiatus, I was able to find there was a simultaneous slowing down of work in most of the caves. Spink calls this slowing down as 'recession' (circa 469 - circa 471 CE) in the sense of economic recession (Figure 225).

The only exception was Cave 1 where neither the recession nor the hiatus is visible. This impels Spink to speculate that it could only have been due to royal patronisation due to which the resources never went dry.

Concurrently Spink says that developments started in some other provinces within the dominions of Hariṣeṇa. Ghaṭotkacha (Figure 215), Aurangabad, Banoṭi (Figures 216-224), and Bāgh are some such sites where Buddhist *saṅghārāmas* were begun to

be established—all within the context of rock-cut architecture. Bāgh lay in Anūpa *janapada*. The style of Ajantā and Bāgh share much in common. There is a body of literature devoted to comparisons and relative chronology. Some say Bāgh pre-dates the second phase of Ajantā; others say, it is later in date. Spink says that during the period of recession hired workers, artists, etc. went to Bāgh in search of employment, and when the recession and hiatus ended at Ajantā, the workers came back again bringing new ideas from Bāgh. Spink postulated this theory in a number of essays over a period of two decades but only to be abandoned in the year 2012. Now, he believes that Bāgh and Ajantā progressed side by side, and definitely exchanged ideas, but had little to do with recession or hiatus of Ajantā.

The foundation of Spink's Ajantā-Bāgh theory depended much on what Spink inferred from a piece of literature dated to the seventh century CE. This work is called *Daśakumāraśarita*, a quasi-historical ornate biography, written by Daṇḍin, the famous ancient author, poet, and aesthetician. Although the work is incomplete, its eight chapter (*uchavāsa*) called *Viśrūtaśarita* has details that has been perceived to contain allusions to the Vākāṭaka dynasty. Collins (1907) and Mirashi (1945) had already studied the work from this angle, and now Spink took the matter further and proposed that the chapter, in its own manner of literary

style, makes a decisive reflection of the times of the downfall of the Vākāṭakas.

In Daṇḍin's work, the Bāgh region is described as Anūpa *janapada* of which the capital was in Mahiṣmatī. The regent posted at Mahiṣmatī was none other than Hariṣeṇa's son. Thus, it was natural for the artistic motifs and styles to travel between Ajantā and Bāgh (W. M. Spink 2006, 109-10).

Some scholars are opposed to the above views of Spink. They do not think that *Daśakumāraśarita* has any historical data. Let us examine the issue in detail.

*Viśrūtaśarita Chapter of Daśakumāraśarita by Daṇḍin*

It was Mark Collins (Collins 1907, 21) who first drew our attention to the narrative in *Daśakumāraśarita* (Ryder 1927), which pointed to the existence of a large southern power ruling over Vidarbha, with no fewer than six feudal kingdoms owing allegiance to it. Collins saw this as a parallel to the actual conditions existing in the days of Daṇḍin himself and, therefore, investigated the matter for fixing the date of that Sanskrit author. Second, Mirāshī took a serious view of Collins and examined the case further in the light of fresh epigraphic material. Mirāshī sought to revise the observations by Collins and stated:

The description of the *Daśakumāraśarita* is corroborated in all-important details by what we know about the history of the

Deccan in the beginning of the sixth century ad. It clearly suggests that the central power in the Vākāṭaka Empire became weak and feudatories began to show signs of revolt during the reign of Harisheṇa's weak successor who led a dissolute life. There was chaos and confusion everywhere in the Vākāṭaka kingdom, which ultimately led to an invasion by the Kadambas of Vanavāsi at the instigation of the ruler of Aśmaka. Owing to the treacherous defection of some other feudatories, the Vākāṭaka king suffered a disastrous defeat and was killed in the fight. The Aśmaka king then annexed Vidarbha to his kingdom. As Dandīn's narrative ends abruptly, we do not know whether Bhāskaravarman, whom we have identified with Harisheṇa's grandson, regained the ancestral throne with external help. But even if he did, he could not have kept it long. And this is what actually happened; for within about fifty years of Hariṣeṇa's death, Vidarbha was occupied by the Kalachuris, who had, in the meanwhile, established themselves at Mahishmati. Silver coins of Krishṇarāja (*circa* a. d. 550-575), the founder of Kalachuri power; have been discovered in the Amraoti District of Berar and the Betul District of Madhya Pradesh. From some other indications also we can infer that Vidarbha was occupied by the Kalachuris during the time of Krishṇarāja.

The forgoing discussion must have made it plain that Dandīn's narrative faithfully reflects the actual political situation in the Deccan in the beginning of the sixth century a. d. Such detailed knowledge of the different kingdoms flourishing in that age clearly indicates that Dandīn must have lived at a time when the events described by him happened or were at least well remembered. [Mirashi: (1945), (1960), and (1963, xxxii-xxxiii)]

The above views of Mirashi were adopted by Spink albeit with certain revisions of his own. While Mirashi's was in the

style of a suggestion, it became a conviction for Spink as can be seen below:

The Viśrūta-carita [...is] the one textual source, which I am convinced, can clarify Vākāṭaka history most fully... If I am correct—and admittedly in this I am in total disagreement with most scholars—the Viśrūta-carita provides us with clear evidence that the Vākāṭaka dynasty came to an end under the Western (Vatsagulma) branch, not the Eastern (Nandivardhana) branch.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, it ended far earlier (in the early 480s) than scholars normally suppose.<sup>17</sup>

The two sources—Ajantā, and the Viśrūta-carita—which should neither be solely 'left to art historians,'<sup>18</sup> nor for reading as a mere 'Alexander Romance'—are the essential keys to late Vākāṭaka history, and we exclude them at our scholarly peril...

I have nonetheless shown, utilizing my revised chronology<sup>19</sup> how the Viśrūta-carita, must transform our whole view of Indian history in the last half of the fifth century, and will also have a great impact upon our understanding of the chaotic developments of the early sixth [ (W. M. Spink 2006, 6, 8)].

In the context of Vākāṭaka epigraphy, the next important name is that of Shāstrī whose work in this area lasted for several decades. Thus, he can be called the successor of Mirāshī.

However, since nearly half of the Vākāṭaka epigraphic material has further surfaced since the time of Mirashi's corpus (Mirashi 1963), Shastri, based on the new enlarged corpus, has presented a different view of the Vākāṭakas. On many issues, he differs sharply with Mirashi, the issue of *Daśakumāra-carita* being no exception. Shastri says:

The belief that *Daśakumāra-carita* contains running commentary on the fall of the Vākāṭakas following the demise of Hariṣeṇa

has nothing to commend itself. It were the aggressive designs of the Viṣṇu-kuṇḍins, Kadambas, Nalas, Munda-putras, Kalachuris of Mahishmati, early Rashtrakutas, and Kumbhakarnas who were earlier their allies or subordinates or had felt the brunt of their intruding arms that hastened the fall of the once stupendous might that had launched itself on the path of decline because of loss of vigour and imperial ambitions due to the natural ageing process. Thus ended the mighty power about the beginning of the sixth century CE.

It is impossible at present to ascertain the factors responsible for the abrupt end of the Vākāṭakas. Mark Collins (1907) felt that the Viśrūta-carita contained the actual account of the political condition of Vidarbha, and V.V. Mirāshī concluded that it actually forms a running commentary on the fall of the Vākāṭakas following Hariṣeṇa's demise and tried to reconstruct the course of events related to it.<sup>20</sup> And this view has since been followed generally.<sup>21</sup> We are, however, inclined to reject this theory on the ground that the last Uchchhvasa alone should not be singled out in the distinction to the earlier sections describing the miraculous successes of the other *kumāras* who followed the mythical Rājavāhana, son of the equally mythical deposed king Rājahamsa of Magadha. In our opinion, the story given in this section is as much a creation of Dandīn as other stories, and therefore is of no help at all in reconstructing the chain of events leading to the fall of the Vākāṭakas. We must therefore explain it otherwise with the help of available sources. [ (Shastri 1997, xii, 209) ]

Bakker has emerged as a major Vākāṭaka scholar who attracted attention to the treasures of the Nandivardhana branch of the Vākāṭakas to whom many Brahmanical sculptures and temples have now been attributed. His research highlights the Vākāṭaka's (direct) patronage to the Brahmanical faith, seeking to shift the spotlight off Ajantā. He has examined

the sources of Vākāṭaka history with no less care, and contends, like Shāstrī, that the *Daśakumāraśarita* does not contain any historical data. Bakker observes:

Mirāshī, followed by Spink with considerably less reservations, derives the role of the feudatories of *Rṣika* from *Daśakumāraśarita*, the eighth *Uchavāsa* of which both authors treat as a reliable description of the historic events that led to the downfall of the House of Hariṣeṇa—as if it were a roman a clef, in which Puṇyavarman represents Hariṣeṇa, Vasantabhānu the king of Aśmaka, Ekavīra the king of *Rṣika* etc.; yet, the eastern Vākāṭakas are conspicuous by their absence. We do not accept this hypothesis for the simple reason that Dandīn's work was composed a century or more after the events it putatively describes and, more importantly, is primarily a literary, not an historical work.<sup>22</sup> [ (H. T. Bakker 1992, 37) ]

This précis of the debate surrounding Dandīn's work need not be overextended. I should like to describe my position and understanding of the issue. I like to look at the problem from a different angle, which might provide some basis for a feasible standpoint. Let me first say that I support the relative positions of Collins, Mirāshī, Spink, and DeCaroli. No doubt, *Daśakumāraśarita* indeed appears *prima facie* to be a work of fiction. Yet let us not forget that the work falls within a particular genre of Indian literature called *śarita* (ornate biography) that have legends, myths, ballads, and imaginations woven around actual, real, historical persons or events. *Śaritas* are not altogether the works of fiction. In fact, there can be no work of literature, let alone fiction

that is absolutely devoid of all socio-cultural, economic, and political reflections. In addition to these, there will always be reflections to geography, material culture, and technology of the times. No literature can exist without a degree of realism. Also, let us note that 'fiction' in the European sense of the term is not the genre wherein *Daśakumāraśarita* fits or belongs. We may in this context recall that a number of other such works of the genre, e.g. *Srīrāmaśaritamānas* by Tulasīdās, which narrates the life of Rama, a Hindu God; *Buddhaśarita* by Aśvaghoṣa, which relates to the life of the Buddha; *Harṣaśarita* by Bāṇabhaṭṭa, which narrates the life and related episodes of the seventh-century King Harṣa of Kannauj. Still further examples are: *Vikramāṅkadevaśarita*, *Navaśaśāṅkaśarita*, *Gauḍawāho*, *Somapālavilāsa*, *Pr̥thvīrājaviṇaya*, etc. Kalhaṇa's *Rājataranginī* gives a delightful account of the reigns of two kings (Lalitāditya reg. 725-61 CE and Jayapīḍa reg. 776-807 CE) of the Karkoṭa dynasty of Kashmir, mixing history with the romantic adventures of folk tales. The *Mahābhārata* too contains references to actual historical, geographical, botanical, political, economic, administrative, military, and socio-cultural dimensions of the times it seeks to describe.

Aside from the *śarita*, another genre may be recalled in point. Gāthā or ballads are also quasi-literary and quasi-historical work of literature and performance. Actual



historical settings are in fact the very foundation, bones, and marrows of the *śarita* and *gāthā* variety of Indian literature and folklore. They are quasi-historical accounts of outstanding personalities. In the course of time, through constant recitation and singing, the ballads undergo a process of transformation. Interpolations take place; numerous versions may come into existence. Yet, these are the genres that somehow retained the memories of the memorable and unforgettable personalities and events. This is how India retained a sense of history. There was no tradition of history and chronicle writing as such we see in the western tradition. Our historiography has always been a part of the literary tradition consisting of the epics, *Pūrāṇas*, ballads, folklore, and the oral, aural, visual, and artistic traditions.

Danḍin's work is a *śarita* too. Hence, no argument can be made that the work has no references to historical persons or events. One should at least pay attention to the fact that it was the author Danḍin himself who employed the suffix *śarita* to the title of his work; there has to be a reason why he did so. On such theoretical grounds alone, we can say that the positions of Collins, Mirāshī, Spink, and DeCaroli are perfectly admissible. The plot of the story indeed appears to have been set against the historical backdrop of the fall of the Vākāṭakas. Far from the absence of historical contents

there was 'peppered,' historical data in *Daśakumāraśarita*. The fictional element is interspersed with the factual; it is enmeshed with the real historical characters, cities, places, rivers, forests, court politics, spy games, and other quasi-historical affairs of the times.

Spink has rightly found a basis in *Daśakumāraśarita*. The scholars who oppose the view cannot see that three sources (Viśrūtaśarita, physical evidence on the site of Ajantā, and epigraphy) when combined and analysed together tell the same story, i.e. the fall of the Vākāṭakas.

#### THE CONTENTIOUS CAVE 17 INSCRIPTION

Equally contentious has been certain verses in the dedicatory inscription incised on the left outer wall of Ajantā Cave 17. The issue arises out of Spink's argument that the name of the cave's donor was Upendragupta, the local king of Ṛṣika province where Ajantā lay in the ancient times. This proposal has been rejected by Shastri and Cohen among others who argue that the name of the donor has been lost due to damage to the inscription. Let us examine the history of the debate. However, first we must take note of the contentious verses.

The related verses 8, 9, 10, and 25 are reproduced below;  
*Devanagari* edition and English translation by Mirashi (1963,  
 121-22, 125, 128):

25 मलपात्मभिः कल्पनयाप्यशक्यम् ॥ [२५॥\*] विपुलां विसृज्य [१\*] अचीकरद्वित्यम<sup>४</sup>मानकल्प-<sup>५</sup>

(V. 25). Having expended abundant [wealth], he caused to be made this donated [hall] which is almost measureless and which cannot be even imagined by little-souled men...

Indraji (Burgess and Indraji 1881, 73) had deduced that 'the elder murdered his brother, but afterwards repented' (verse 12). Although this is not an interpretation that is found in any of the subsequent editions of the inscription, from

Indraji's edition it would appear to be a viable deduction. Indraji further interpreted on the status of the donor within the Vākāṭaka kingdom and the cause and motive behind the religious charity: 'the construction of the *Vihāra* by the king or his minister, while Hariṣeṇa was ruling—almost certainly one of the Vākāṭakas to whom this Aśmaka family may have been subordinate.'

*Readings by Mirashi*

It was Mirashi who for the first time gave a fuller and systematic description of the content of the entire inscription, which is worthy of being quoted at length:

... The inscription was caused to be incised by a prince whose name is now unfortunately lost, but who was probably ruling over Khāndesh as **a feudatory** of the **Vākāṭaka Emperor Hariṣeṇa**. The object of it is to record the excavation, by this prince, of the *vihāra* cave XVII and the *gandhakuṭi* Cave XIX at Ajantā.<sup>24</sup> [ (Mirashi, *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas*, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* series 1963, 121); emphasis in original]

**Krishnadasa** married a princess whose name also is unfortunately uncertain.<sup>25</sup> He had from her two sons who are said to have resembled Pradyumna and Sāmba, the well-known sons of the epic hero Krishna. The name of the elder son has not been preserved, but the younger was called Ravisāmba. The elder son succeeded to the throne. The two brothers conquered Aśmaka and other countries and lived happily together, with increasing fraternal love and fame. After some time Ravisāmba met with premature death, which, the poet says, was due to his deeds in former lives. The elder brother, being overwhelmed with sorrow and convinced of the transitoriness of worldly

existence, began to lead a pious life. He waited upon saintly persons known for their learning, charity, compassion and other virtues and imitated in his actions righteous kings. He bestowed munificent gifts on suppliants and being moved by compassion, released from bondage terrified persons by spending large amounts for the purpose. Realising that wealth causes an obstacle in the attainment of *siddhi* by meditation on the Omniscient (Buddha), he adorned the earth with *stūpas* and *viḥāras*, and delighted suppliants with liberal gifts, while **Hariṣeṇa**, the moon among kings, was protecting the earth. He also caused the excellent monolith *mandapa* containing the *chaitya* of the Buddha to be excavated in the form of the present Cave XVII on a beautiful spur of the **Sahya** Mountain. He provided it with a water cistern and caused a noble *gandhakuṭi*<sup>26</sup> to be excavated to the west of it in another part of the same hill. The last verse (29) expresses the hope that the *mandapa* would cause the well-being of good people as long as the sun continues to dispel darkness with its rays. [ (Mirashi 1963, 122-23) ]

The last of these kings whose name is unfortunately lost was a contemporary, and probably a feudatory of the Vākāṭaka Emperor Hariṣeṇa who was preceded by ten other princes. [ (Mirashi 1963, 122); emphasis in original ]

As can be seen Mirāshī does not speculate about the name of the deceased brother. Mirashi is the first scholar who deduced that the penultimate name that is lost in the given genealogy is the king who not only patronised Cave 17, but also the neighbouring caves 18, 19, and 20.

#### *Readings by Spink*

Spink took forward from where Mirashi had left. He reasons that the donor '...gupta's father was 'Kṛṣṇadāsa' he is very

likely the 'Kṛ...' of Cave 20 inscription whose son there is clearly stated as 'Upendragupta.' This is incised on the left pilaster of Cave 20. Spink believes that 'Kṛ...' of Cave 20 is 'Kṛṣṇadāsa' of Cave 17, and by that account the name of Cave 17's donor, which is illegible, must be construed as Upendragupta. To support this logic, Spink cites another verse from Cave 17 inscription that states that the donor has also donated a cistern and a '*gandhakuṭī*' among other *maṇḍapas* on the hill. Both Mirashi and Spink identify the cistern as Ajantā Cave 18 (which indeed is a cistern) and the *gandhakuṭī* (literally, perfumed hall but semantically the place where the Buddha is seated) as Cave 19. Thus, Upendragupta for Spink is the donor of Caves 17, 18, 19, and 20.

The above thesis of Spink has a serious problem. Even if we agree that the donor's name was Upendragupta, it would not be correct. This is simply because a homonymous member is already mentioned in the genealogy several generations before. He is mentioned son of Śaurisāmba and father of Kacha I. Thus, the correct name of the penultimate member carrying homonymous name would be Upendragupta II, and not just Upendragupta.

*Readings by Shastri*

Shastri consulted the same 'excellent estampage' (Shastri 1997, plate XCVI) of the inscription from the Government Epigraphist that Mirāshī had done for his reading (Mirashi 1949). In his interpretation, Shastri created a shockingly new idea raising the pitch of the debate to a new level. He says that the donor's name is neither illegible nor lost or damaged. The penultimate name is perfectly preserved in the same line albeit elsewhere: '*dharādhīpārakhyam*'. He identifies Dharādhipa as proper noun, and alleges that the word was unduly interpreted as adjective or appellation to one imagined Upendragupta II. Based on this reading Shastri has prepared a new genealogical table:

(Name lost) → son Dhṛtarāṣṭra → son? Harisāmba → son?  
 Śaurisāmba → son? Upendragupta → younger son Kacha I → son?  
 Bhikṣudāsa → son Nīladāsa → son? Kacha II → son Kṛṣṇadāsa,  
 married Atichandrā and had two sons → 1. **Dharādhipa** 2.  
 Ravisāmba.<sup>27</sup> [ (Shastri 1997, 47); emphasis added]

Shastri explains:

Mirāshī observes that the name of the elder brother of Ravisāmba, the last known member of the family, has not been preserved though 'he bore the title of a king. However, the expression *Dharādhipa-akhyam* employed in connection with the first prince (*kumara*) appears to denote 'one bearing the name Dharādhipa' even as *Ravisāmba-sanjnām* used for the second son and rightly taken to mean bearing 'the appellation Ravisāmba.' The name Dharādhipa, 'lord of the earth,' need not be regarded as unusual as names like Narendra, 'lord of men', and Bhupati

or Avanindra, 'lord of the earth,' are known to have been borne by individuals.

Utterly grieved at the untimely decease of Ravisāmba, his elder brother Dharādhipa developed an utter distaste for worldly pleasures and riches and pursued a pious life dedicated to Buddhism. He covered his kingdom with *stūpas* and *vihāras* and made charities to the suppliants. Finally, and that is the object of the epigraph, a monolithic hall (Cave XVII) with a *chaitya* of the Munirāja (viz. Buddha) and near it a large water-cistern and a grand *gandha-kuti* Chaitya (Cave XIX) to its west was created at a huge cost and donated to the local Buddhist *Saṅgha*. And the record ends with a wish for the longevity and permanence of these monuments. [ (Shastri 1997, 47-48) ]

Thus to sum up, for Mirashi, it was impossible to decipher the name of this elder brother due to damage to the inscription. For Spink, the undeciphered name must surely have been Upendragupta. For Shastri, the name was never lost; it is well preserved and translated but never detected or interpreted correctly. He has interpreted the name to be Dharādhipa, the word mentioned in the same line but interpreted earlier as mere appellation for the lost name.

#### *Readings on Ṛṣika and Aśmaka janapadas*

The ancient *janapadas* called Ṛṣika and Aśmaka are referred to in the inscriptions of Ajantā caves 17 and 26. Cave 17 inscription informs us that the patron was the ruler of Ṛṣika who subjugated several kingdoms including Aśmaka. The inscription of Cave 26 mentions that the donor was in



friendship with the minister of Aśmakarājā. Thus, directly or indirectly we have the presence of two opposing forces on the site of Ajantā. Therefore, the question of the location of these *janapadas* became a central point in research. Mirashi analysed the matter in detail and observed that Ṛṣika is the *janapada* where Ajantā laid in the ancient times.

The *janapadas* were at times independent states, and at others, they were conquered by larger imperial states.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it has been observed that Ṛṣika along with the neighbouring *janapadas* of Mūlaka and Aśmaka were subsumed within the administrative frontiers of Vākāṭaka Hariṣeṇa, although it appears that the local kings retained the royal status and simply accepted or were forced to come under the imperial rule of Hariṣeṇa, at least during the tenure of his brief rule.

There is actually a long history of debate over the location of these *janapadas* some of which we can refer to here. Regarding the location of Ṛṣika and Aśmaka territories Shāstrī writes:

We are inclined to support Bhagwānlāl Indrajī's view that the ruling family [whose genealogy is mentioned in Cave 17 inscription] belonged to the Aśmaka country, which in our opinion included the southern part of the Marāthwādā region to the south of the river Godāvarī together with some part of the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh. In verse 10 of the record in question containing the name Aśmaka etc. (*Asmak-ādī*), Mirāshī read before it the four letters as *niyōchrita* which,

according to him, referred to the subjugation of the prosperous countries like Aśmaka by the last two members of the ruling family. However, even if his reading were to be accepted, it would not support the suggested meaning. For referring to victory, *jītvā* would have been the most efficient expression and *jītv=occhritam=Asmak-adīkam* would not have affected the metre also. Holy places in India were nobody's monopoly and any one could visit them and do pious acts there unhindered by the ruling family of the region. However, when an outsider, particularly a member of the ruling family, did such things, he felt it desirable to introduce himself, and this explains why we are faced with the genealogical account of the ruling family which had under its ruler Aśmaka and other regions which are said to have prospered under the two royal brothers.

Verse 21 contains the conventional coaxing description of the family's overlord: we are told that the earth was then protected by Hari Sheṇa, the moon among the kings with his face resembling the lotus and the moon and engaged in doing well to his subjects. We thus learn from this inscription that Aśmaka was one of the dependencies of the Vatsgulma branch of the Vākāṭakas during at least the reign of its last known member, if not earlier. Thus, the rule of this branch of the family extended at least up to the Telanganā region of Āndhra Pradesh in the south. [ (Shastri 1997, 48-49)]

#### *Readings on the word 'niyōchrita'*

Mirāshī inserted the word '*niyōchrita*' (literally, subjugated) in verse 10 of the inscription. He claimed, 'These four *aksharas* read by me for the first time are almost certain' (Mirashi 1963, 125, n. 10). He was able to read this in 'an excellent inked estampage supplied by the Government Epigraphist of India printed in the *Hyderabad Archaeological*

*Series*, No. 15,' reproduced on plate xxvii of his *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas* (Mirashi 1963). This reading, however, has been disputed by Shastri and Cohen (Cohen 1995, 47–48). The former also used the same estampage for his reading. So, we do not know which side to take. In case the objections by Shastri and Cohen are found valid then the entire reconstructions of Spink—which are based on Mirashi's insertion of the word, which led Spink to postulate that there were two decisive conflicts between the Ṛṣika and Aśmaka forces wherein the former was victorious in the first conflict, and the latter in the second—would be rendered untenable. Spink relying on Mirāshī's reading suggests that King Upendragupta [II] who was the sponsor of Caves 17, 18, 19, and 20 subjugated the Aśmaka king ruling in the neighbourhood. Thus, due to this conflict patronage on the site slowed down leading to what he calls the phase of recession. Soon the Aśmaka king retaliated within a few years and this time they defeated the Ṛṣika king. Spink has found on-site evidence that suggest that Cave 20 patronised by Ṛṣika king was desecrated by Aśmakas, the new rulers of the region after the conflict. Spink further says that the Aśmakas were so emboldened by the victory that they turned aggressors, and created an alliance with some disgruntled kings of other janapadas, especially in the aftermath of Hariṣeṇa's death, and created a successful insurrection

toppling the mighty Vākāṭaka Empire. Thus, Spink has staked a lot on a single word.

In his volume II Spink (W. M. Spink 2006, 96-113) has devoted a chapter to reply to Cohen's objections although he has not made any reply to answer the readings by Shastri. Perhaps, future research may shed more light on this issue.

### CONCLUSION

The age of the Satavahana-period caves is more or less understood (2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE -1<sup>st</sup> c. CE). However, the age of the fifth-century caves has been a tough nut to crack. Although, full exploration of all the issues requires careful consideration of all the evidence and sources, there are a certain points that are crucial to resolve the dating issue. The chronology proposed by Walter M. Spink (circa 462 BCE - circa 480 CE) needs to be reviewed against the observations by Shāstrī who likes to extend the timeframe of the second phase of Ajantā by two decades. Shāstrī's views, in the light of fresh readings of epigraphs, are aimed to revise upon the earlier readings by Mirāshī that are the foundations of Spink's reconstructions. In the absence of Spink's replies to Shastri the debate is left open for more probing studies. On the issue of *Daśakumāraśarita*, we are inclined to go by Collins, Mirashi, and Spink.