

CH. 12: THE FIRST INITIATED TEMPLE: CAVE 26-COMPLEX—THE DONATIVE INSCRIPTION

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INTRODUCTION

THE FAMOUS dedicatory inscription³² of Buddhabhadra is incised over the right doorway on the porch of the *śailagrha*³³ No. 26 at Ajantā (Figure 182). Spink has dated it to c. 461-480 CE (Figure 225), and as per the inscription, it was the benefaction of one monk Buddhabhadra (Figure 181).

The patron was probably a famous person in his own lifetime and a genius too as is learned from my study (Chapters 12-14). Although his name is not new to scholars, the extent of his greatness and significance of his contribution in the history of rock cut architecture in general and the Buddhist context in particular is not

adequately recognised. The monk appears to have been a practitioner of propriety and the *vinaya*, and had additional taste and respect for creativity and talent, for he set a rare example by not only recording but also acknowledging the gratitude felt for two individuals who 'saw to the excavation of the edifice on [his] behalf.' They are Dharmadatta and Bhadrabandhu. Whether they were artists, overseers, or architects we are not told. But from analysis of the inscription and the monument it appears that the two monks were not just overseers; they were experts in *vāstu*, *pratimā-vijnāna*, and *jyotiṣ*.³⁴ Our analysis claims that the duos could be prime contenders for the first known Great Masters of Indian art.

The inscription is fascinating in many ways. However, some earlier readings and editions have led to some misconceptions. For early scholars and some of our age the donor belonged to the post-Vākāṭaka age.³⁵ Thus, the *śaityagṛha* was dated to the post-Vākāṭaka age. The dating *inter alia* was based on the presence of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa inscription that is incised on a wall within the *śaityagṛha* complex. Art historically, the *śaityagṛha*'s late type features, styles, placement, and iconography led the impression of a late date. Epigraphically, the late dating was supported by the fact that Buddhabhadra's dedicatory inscription makes no mention whatsoever of the Vākāṭakas.

Instead, it presents eulogy of one “Aśmakarājā” who was interpreted as a successor to the Vākāṭakas in the region.

Recent researches by Spink (2007) and Singh (2012b) indicate the contrary. It now emerges that the *śaityagṛha* must belong to the Vākāṭaka period (Chapter 13). The patron not only lived in the ripe age of the Vākāṭakas of the Vatsagulma branch, he must have been among the earliest donors to come to the site in the Vākāṭaka period.³⁶ The Aśmakarājā of Cave 26 inscription is comparable to Maharaja Subandhu of the *Daśakumāraśarita* who engineered a confederation of revolting feudal lords to topple the Vākāṭaka King Hariṣeṇa. Apparently, the plot was successful, and Aśmakarājā usurped the kingdom but soon sending the empire into disintegration. At the time when the Vākāṭaka king was no more, Buddhabhadra decided to record the eulogy in favour of his eternal friend Bhavvirāja who was the minister of Aśmakarājā and his son Devarāja had already succeeded at the time the inscription was incised. This is an explanation to the omission of the Vākāṭakas in the dedicatory inscription of Buddhabhadra.

As regards the late type features of the *śaityagṛha*, it is because much of the decorations are late while the underlying structure is very early that started with the renaissance of Ajantā in the Vākāṭaka period. The late type features in fact are among the latest of the prevailing art,

iconographic, and aesthetic fashions at the site. Because continuous additions, modifications, and re-working were undertaken throughout the period of development, especially during the last years of activity, the original plain structure of the edifice and early features have been either removed or not easily traceable now.

The Rāṣṭrakūṭa inscription belongs to the Rāṣṭrakūṭa period and has nothing to do with the original patron. Because a tragedy had struck the site of Ajantā just before the various edifices were nearing completion, the site was summarily abandoned in midway or at the prime of activity, and the people had perhaps fled from the region. In later centuries, when the Rāṣṭrakūṭas controlled the province, the inscription was incised there, as the Rāṣṭrakūṭas were great builders and patrons themselves and could not help having made some intervention of their kind.

After laying the above historical background about the edifice, let us turn to the inscription itself for a scrutiny, for the inscription is fairly long and contains much information that has not been adequately assessed. The inscription points to Buddhābhadrā as a monk extraordinary. Even if the tone and texture of the language contains eulogy, there are information provided in the form of the *abhidhā*, *vyājanā*, and *lakṣaṇā* that deserve closer attention and analysis.

In the era of multi-disciplinary studies, it is no longer advantageous to focus simply on the text of the inscription. The inscription is but one type of text made up of discursive alphabets and lexicons. Its creator created another type of text of which the lexicons are preserved in the form of sculptures, architectural elaborations, and aesthetic layout. This type in the language of semiotics is also called as *text*.³⁷ The written text and visually shaped forms are both regarded as *signs* and *signifiers*. The two types of texts have a generic source, i.e. the author, the patron, or the monk Buddhahadra in this case. This connectivity establishes an ideal example of *inter-text*, to use the language of semiotics. It is in this sense of the inter-text that I wish to study the inscription and the edifice, mutually inter-dependent, co-related, and complimentary in terms of the production of meaning.

There is a third domain of meaning, i.e. the *subtext*³⁸ but archaeology and epigraphy is traditionally wary of sub-textual interpretations. Even I do not wish to enter into this territory, for the realm of the text and inter-texts would suffice our purpose here. Many recent scholars, in the case of epigraphy, take the "authorial intention"³⁹ (especially the *praśasti* or eulogy) with a pinch of salt, and they may do so and go well beyond it, for the *signifiers*⁴⁰ (the *inscription* as well as the *monument*) point to a number

of *signifieds*⁴¹ and *referents*.⁴² It is our objective to disseminate the signifieds and referents that were elusive hitherto.

A SURVEY OF VARIOUS EDITIONS

The inscription consists of seventeen lines and nineteen verses. Although noticed before, first, it was Bhau Dāji (Ajunta Inscriptions 1865) who published a transcript and translation, but he did not publish any estampage or facsimile. Second, the inscription was re-edited with a fresh translation by Pandit Bhagwānlāl Indraji (Burgess and Indraji 1881, 77–79). Third, it was Buhler (Burgess 1883, 132–36) who published the estampage first and added his own revised transcript and translation. The fourth attempt was made by B. Ch. Chhabra (Yazdani 1952, 114–18) who published a new edition along with a fresh transcript and translation. Fifth, Cohen (Cohen 2006, 333–34) has recently re-edited Chhabra's edition with a new transcript. He has not, however, provided any translation.

The literature survey reveals two glaring examples of omission. Mirashi's *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas* (1963) and Shastri's *Vākāṭakas: Sources and History* (1997)—the two milestones in Vākāṭaka and Ajantā epigraphy—have excluded the epigraph from the respective corpuses. The reason is not far

to seek. Traditionally, the epigraphists have maintained that the Vākāṭakas had nothing to do with Buddhabhadra or his *śaityagr̥ha* Cave 26. Whereas the research by Spink (2006, 22–96) and the present author (Singh 2012b) has established beyond doubt that the *śaityagr̥ha* was among the earliest to have been excavated at Ajantā in the Vākāṭaka phase. It is important hence to adopt the inter-disciplinary approach while dealing with epigraphy. Analysis of inscriptions must take into consideration the art historical and archaeological facts.

Indraji's edition shows more than 17 verses in 17 lines, although the quantum of lines is misprinted as 27 in the subjoined Descriptive Notes by Burgess (1881). The editions by Buhler (Burgess 1883, 132–36) and Chhabra (Yazdani 1952, 114–18) show 19 verses in 17 lines. The additional two verses were included after fresh readings of the inscribed surface, which is slightly damaged. Due to the damage, some portions of the text in line 1, and lines 15 to 17 were illegible. The composition of the record is metrical throughout. The language contains expressions peculiar to Buddhist literature, and shows occasional influence of Pāli. The record is not dated but Buhler has palaeographically placed it between c. 450 and c. 525 CE. The lines of the inscription do not correspond to those of the verses. The inconsistency seems to be the result of the scribe's free hand approach; he

perhaps began scribing without composing the line layout. It is also probable that the scribe may not have possessed adequate knowledge of Sanskrit. Or the composer of the verses probably had his own shortcoming, as even noted by Burgess:

The language is faulty and ungrammatical Sanskrit, containing a number of peculiar Buddhistic phrases. It is such as might be expected to be written by a Bauddha Acharya (vs. 19) who, like the Jaina Yatis of our days, possessed only a superficial knowledge of the Brahmanical idiom. [(Burgess 1883, 133)]

A degree of ambiguity is found in certain verses. For instance, at one place the inscription mentions that the donor followed the footsteps of Sthavira Muni Achala who had built a similar *śailagr̥ha* for the Buddha. But, we do not know who this Achala is. Some have identified him as A-chelo who is found in the records of Xuanzang who visited India between c. 621 and c. 645 CE. In Xuanzang description, Achala's work has been assigned a date long past. Can this past be traced to the late fifth century when Ajantā's second phase was happening? We are just wondering whether Xuanzang's A-chelo and Buddhābhadrā's Achala are the variants of the same name and person. It would only remain guesswork, since unfortunately we have no knowledge about any such Buddhist monument erected elsewhere in fifth century, let alone the question of attributing the same to any Achala.

The inscription is uniquely 'self-reflexive' in the sense it contains reflections of the donor's personality,

preferences, belief system, and social status. We are not the first to wonder who Buddhahadra was, since the question had teased Burgess too:

Buddhabhadra seems to have been no common monk (vs. 7). The nature of the work which he performed clearly indicates that he possessed considerable wealth. His friendship with the minister of the king of Aśmaka, in whose honour the cave was excavated, and the epithet "*abhiḥjānopapāṇna*" (vs. 16), which seems to mean that he was of noble family, indicate, too, that he was more than a common begging friar. Perhaps we shall not err, if we assume that he occupied a position analogous to that of a Jaina Sripuj and was the spiritual head of some Bauddha sect. The fact that he mentions "his striving for the welfare of the people" (vs. 16), and "his having taken upon himself the care of the people," may be adduced in support of this view. [(Burgess 1883, 133)]

We wish to follow the quest initiated by Burgess and explore further about the man and his work. There is sufficient amount of information provided in the inscription about the *śaityagrha*. The text talks about another text and both the texts are open before us to be read again. The inscription identifies some of the outstanding features of the *śaityagrha*. Indirectly, we are also given clues about the donor's personal wisdom, beliefs, and motives. There is a mention of the donor's parents, a feature common to dedicatory epigraphs. At a subtle level, there are indications about the donor's views on spiritual matters, *puṇya karma* (good deeds), ideas about heavens, and rituals. The reference to Bhavvirāja who is said to be the minister of the king of the Aśmaka

country is most fascinating, and this reference has received the maximum scholarly attention so far. In a slightly different tone, we are informed about the donor's high social status, reputation, and political links. Bhavvirāja is proclaimed as a "friend since many births." The inscription attaches exceptional emphasis to this friendship and several verses are invested for eulogy and genealogy of this friend and Aśmakarājā. Moreover, the donor has gone to the extent of dedicating the temple to Bhavvirāja, in his honour. We are told that Bhavvirāja passed away, and his son, Devarāja, took over the ministerial post. The dedication of the temple to Bhavvirāja was accordingly made besides assigning the merit of the donation to parents and all sentient beings. Such an honour and celebration of friendships are rare to find not only in this world, but also in the corpus of inscriptions. The friendship thus has been immortalised, which is what Buddhabhadra had wished for and planned meticulously as will come out from analysis ahead. Two more people are immortalised by way of acknowledging gratitude toward those "who saw to the excavation of the cave on my behalf." They are Dharmadatta and Bhadrabandhu.

ANALYSIS OF CERTAIN VERSES

Verse 3

Tato namaskāra-guṇ-ābhidhānaṃ⁶ bhavaty-avandhyaṃ vipulaṃ mah-ārtthaṃ [] pradattaṃ
ekaṃ kusumaṃ cha yatra svargg-āpavargg-ākhyā-phalāśya hetuḥ [|| 3 ||*]

Obeisance and praise (*offered to him*) will never turn fruitless from him, (*they rather*) bring abundant (*and*) great reward from him, and (*even*) a single flower offered to whom yields the fruit known as paradise (*and even*) final emancipation.⁴³

[(Yazdani, 1952 pp. 115-17)]

Sentiments of a devotee: A devotee will not fail to relate to the devout sentiments expressed here. It is a declaration of absolute devotion to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. The extent of devotion is felt in this beautiful verse. The manifest meaning (*abhidhā*) is clear when we are told about the great implications (*'mahā-artthaṃ'*) and the abundant (*'vipulaṃ'*) merits of obeisance (*'namaskār-guṇ'*) and praise to the Lord. *'Pradattaṃ-ekaṃ kusumaṃ'* or offering of a single flower to the Buddha brings the fruit of paradise (*'swargga'*) and final emancipation (*mokṣa*). What to speak of the fruits associated with the creation and dedication of a grand, sumptuous, and lavish *kīrti* (monument) for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. The verse declares about the prime and unquestionable motive of the donor behind sponsoring the edifice. There could be other motives, such as securing name and fame in society by resorting to such philanthropy, which

is common even today, but the fact of the donor being a genuinely devout monk cannot be undermined in any interpretation. A famous American scholar has compared Buddhahadra to the likes of today's *bābās* and *sādhus* in India, many of them appear frequently on television and who appear to be rather interested in name, fame, money, and politics—all in the name of religion. While the latter is certainly true to an extent, and Buddhahadra also had wealth and political linkage, I object to such a comparison, which unwisely undermines Buddhahadra's intentions evident in his inscription and monumental creation.

Verse 16

Yo

Buddha-śāsana-gatim samabuddhya⁶ jāto bhikṣur-vya(rvva)yasy-abhinave-bhijan-opapanna-
[h |*]
bahu-śrutaḥ ś[i]la-viśuddha-chetā [lokasya mokṣāya kṛi]⁷t-ādhikāraḥ || [16 ||*]

He who, born of a noble family, endowed with great learning, with his mind purified by righteous conduct, (*competent to lead the people on the path of liberation*), having perfectly mastered the course of the Buddha's teachings, became a monk in his early age. [(Yazdani 1952, 118)]

Buddha-śāsana-gati from early age. We are informed here that Buddhahadra was born of a noble family. Was he a Kshatriya earlier belonging to a royal or ministerial clan who embraced Buddhism (*Buddha-śāsana-gati*) at an early age—like the hundreds and thousands of people who were also, in my mind, rapidly embracing Buddhism in that catalytic era of fifth

century in the Deccan? The life of a convert in fifth century was bound to be qualitatively different from those of the Sthāviravāda period. After becoming a monk at an early age, we are not sure how Buddhābhaddra later in his life was able to become a '*saṃvidyamāna-vibhāva*' (wealthy person), as mentioned in verse 7 ahead. Was the *bhikṣu* not required any more to renounce the family and the world and dedicate his life entirely to the *Saṅgha*? How was he able to amass wealth so as to fund the *śaityagrha*? The only answer can be, as also interpreted by Burgess in the earlier quote, that the monk must have become the head of a regional or provincial unit of the *Saṅgha* or head of a sect in which capacity he earned fame, name, political connections, and the required fund (probably in the form of collective donations from the laity) for the *śaityagrha*.

Verse 7

Prāg-eva bodhisatvair-bhava-sukha-kāmaś-cha moksha-kāmaś-cha [*] saṃvidyamāna-vibhava-
vaiḥ katham na kāryā bhavet-kīrttiḥ || [7 ||*]

Why should not a monument⁴⁴ be raised by those possessing wealth, desirous of mundane happiness as also of liberation?— (such a charity should indeed be performed) far rather by Bodhisattvas ('those beings who aspire after pure knowledge') for the happiness of the world as also for (their own) final emancipation?⁴⁵ [(Yazdani 1952, 117)]

Samyak expenditure of resources. In this oft-quoted verse, we are told about a *samyak* (right) way of expending wealth. The

expression “*samvidyamāna-vibhāvas*” literally means people who have everything. Wealth is connoted here, and those who aspire for *sukha* (happiness) and *moksha* (emancipation or liberation from the cycle of life) are exhorted for resorting to such religious philanthropy by expending wealth for the creation of such temples for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. The speech is interrogative; it asks why a monument should not be raised by those possessing wealth and desirous of happiness and emancipation. The expression is also a *vyanjanā* in that it contains the latent meaning whereby no secret is made about the donor being one such *samvidyamāna-vibhāva* (person having everything). The use of the third person is a literary and aesthetic device to actually connote the first person. It is a justification of and a didactic prescription for the *samyak* (right) expenditure of personal wealth and resources.

The word *kīrti* has dual meanings as noted by Chhabra (n. 13). These are “fame” and “monument.” “*Katham na kāryya bhavet-kīrtih*” implies both: Why should not a *monument* or *fame* be worked upon? It is asserting a belief, speaking a firm mind; it is a way to relate to a long tradition. The greatest monuments of the world would not have been erected without a firm mind, resolution, and clarity of purpose. But this is not just another inscription where we are simply provided with a piece of information. Here, in this case, the

information is available to be corroborated. And the corroboration can be done with the monument itself, which stands physically intact to a large degree. Cave 26 *śaityagṛha*-complex is that *kīrti*, the monument; it is that signified. In order to verify the claims of the signifier, i.e. the inscription per se one must properly examine the signified, i.e. the *śaityagṛha*. I have made a detailed survey of that edifice and some revealing facts are outlined in (Singh 2012b). The fundamental conclusion of that exercise is the discovery of the fact that it was the first *śaityagṛha* made in three hundred years; it was the grandest temple-complex (Figure 205) ever made in the history of rock-cut architecture by late fifth century CE; it is a marvel of innovation and experimentation; while respecting the dictates of the Sthāviravādins (Early Buddhists) it aggressively amalgamated some ideas of the Mahāyāna tradition; it heralded and symbolised a new world of individualism; it was the result of changing social orders in a new age of fresh and challenging value systems; architecturally, iconographically, and theologically it was a melting pot of ideas—a monument full of uniqueness. Such a vast, ambitious, and challenging undertaking was initiated for the first time in three hundred years by the hands of Buddhābhaddra. He funded it single-handedly. Latest research shows that the donor also funded *śaityagṛha* No. 21, 23, 24, 25, 27, and possibly 28 too.⁴⁶ There is clear indication that he did all this within his lifetime,

for every one of his monuments bears a unifying signature mark.

The wealth and *kīrti* connection acquired a new dimension in the age of the Gupta-Vākāṭakas if the connection cannot be said to be unprecedented altogether in the history of Buddhist patronage. Earlier, as we understand, the norm was that the donor, no matter who he was, would let the Saṅgha undertake the task of executing architectural projects, as seen in the case of the Sātavāhana patronisations where Ajantā-like individual tastes or any other evidence of personal interventions are not to be found. Buddhist scholars relying solely on the information supplied by the texts can be seriously misled if art historical evidence is not taken into account. Probably, the shift in "*kārya-nispādan*" from the Saṅgha to the individual patron happened really from Ajantā's Vākāṭaka phase onwards. Political stability under Vākāṭaka Hariṣeṇa, better economic conditions, and the likely acceptance or resurgence of Bodhidharma especially in Khāndesh and Marāthwādā regions are coterminous with the age of Ajantā. The rise of individual patronage must be linked to this new socio-political, economic, and religious context. There are reasons to believe, if one studies the chronology of Ajantā, that Buddhabhadra was really a trendsetter along with many other donors who concurrently began the excavation

of other caves on the site, many of which reflect the subtle personal tastes of different donors.

Verse 8

Yāvat-kīrttir-lloke tāvat-svargge-
shu modati cha dehī [||*] chandr-ārka-kāla-kalpā kāryyā kīrttir-mahīdhreshu || [8 ||*]

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.⁴⁷ [(Yazdani 1952, 118)]

Immortality and paradise. The existence of paradise is commonly acknowledged in many faiths. There are significant differences though regarding the types of paradise and the ways to secure a place therein. The verse in question informs us rather conditionally that 'a man continues to enjoy himself in paradise as long as his memory is green in the world.' But 'yāvat-kīrttir-lloke tāvat-svarggeshu modati' seems to have a double-layered meaning owing to the word *kīrti*, which as seen earlier has two meanings: 'fame' and 'monument' or temple. Hence, the other translation would be: *A man continues to enjoy himself in paradise as long as his monument / temple is green in the world.* We could ignore the second translation if only the next part of the verse was not complimenting it. For, in that part, we are clearly told: 'One should (*therefore*) set up a memorial on the mountains that will endure for as long as the moon and the sun continue.'

It is not conceivable that no *śaityagr̥has* were made in India between the 'lull period' of late second to mid-fifth century CE. The lack of archaeological evidence could only be attributed to the usage of less durable building materials such as wood or brick, which are no longer preserved. It is not easy for rock-cut architecture to perish or vanish altogether within a period of one or two millennia. Besides, they are more resilient against vandalism. Even Islamic invaders could not vandalise rock-cut architecture to the extent they did in case of structural temples. Moreover, natural calamities, such as flood, draught, storm, or earthquakes have less damaging effect on rock-cut monuments. Further, because the Buddha had prescribed that such establishments should be sufficiently away from the areas of habitation, the rock-cut monuments have not suffered much from human interference either.

So much of merit in choosing to make a rock-cut temple instead of a structural temple! If permanence, endurance, and sustainability are the prime motives, the only option left for a patron of Buddhism is to go for a rock-cut *śaityagr̥ha*. And, Buddhabhadra decided exactly that to do. He had well envisioned that the monument, the *kīrti*, would "endure as long as the sun and moon shine" above. Along with the *kīrti* (the monument), his *kīrti* (fame) would also endure, and to this end leaving an inscription with his name as the donor

was the key. Buddhabhadra thus was a person who was far-sighted and he planned his immortality very well. His *kīrti* (the monument) and *kīrti* (the fame) are both enduring in the present times. Hence, it is hoped that Buddhabhadra is still enjoying a place in the paradise which he aspired for, and for which he expended so much of religious devotion, so much of wealth, so much of planning, and so much of envisioning into the future!

Verses 9-13

sur-āsura-āchāryyā(ryya)-mateshu kovidaṃ mahānubhāv-Āśmaka-rāja-mantriṇam || [9 ||*]
 Lokajñāṃ ekānta-Samantabhadraṃ sarva-ārtthinām arttha-karaṃ suvāchaṃ ||*|| guṇ-onnataṃ
 praśraya-
 [na]mra-m[ū]rttiṃ khyātiṃ gataṃ saccharitaiḥ pri(pri)thivyām || [10 ||*] Daṇḍa-sāddhyāni
 kāryyāni vyāyām-aika-rasānyapi ||*|| yasasādhayati sāmnaiva nri(nri)patermantri(ntri)-pum'n-
 gava[h*] || [11 ||*] Itthaṃ-
 bhūto'sya putro'pi Devarājo dhuraṃddharaḥ ||*|| pitaryyuparate yena padamunnāmitaṃ
 guṇaiḥ || [12 ||*] Taṃ Bhavvirājam uddīśya mātā-pitaram eva cha² ||*|| bhikṣuṇā Buddha-
 bhadreṇa
 kāritaḥ Sugatā[layaṃ³] || [13 ||*]

(V. 9-13) The monk Buddhabhadra has caused (*this*) temple of Sugata to be made in honour of his parents as well as in honour of (*that*) Bhavvirāja who served the mighty king of Āśmaka as the latter's minister, who was attached to him (*the monk*) in friendship through many successive births, who was steadfast, grateful, wise, learned, expert in the polity both of Brihaspati and of Sukra, proficient in social laws and customs, worshipping only the Buddha, supplying the needs of all the needy; who was very eloquent, was exalted through his virtues, was all humility, was renowned the world over for his pious character, was blessed with a son, an equally foremost personality, Devarājā (*by name*), who accomplishes, with tact and sweetness only, even such tasks as would normally call for rigours and active struggle, who is (*now*) the excellent minister of the king (*of Āśmaka*), and who, on the demise of

his father, raised the (*dignity of his*) office by his excellences. [(Yazdani 1952, 118); emphasis in original.]

Friendship with Bhavvirāja, the minister of Aśmakarājā.

Persons of religious orders and people in politics have gone hand in hand. The connection should not surprise us since religions have always thrived at the behest of royal patronage. Christianity received a boost after the sanction and patronage of the Roman emperor, and Buddhism received a booster at the behest of Samrāt Asoka. Likewise, it is true in Islam and other faiths. There is no dearth of epigraphs from religious monuments that sing the eulogies of ruling powers. Varāhadēva, the donor of Ajantā Cave 16 and the Ghatōtkacha cave was a minister himself in the court of Hariṣeṇa the Vākāṭaka king of the Vatsagulma branch. Upendragupta II (or Dharādhipa, the patron of Cave 17)⁴⁸ has also sung a eulogy of the Vākāṭaka kings.

Buddhabhadra, however, makes no mention of the Vākāṭakas. He instead eulogizes the minister of the Aśmaka king who was probably a feudatory of Vākāṭaka Hariṣeṇa. The omission of the Vākāṭakas from Buddhabhadra's inscription is definitely a point to be noted. Perhaps, the Vākāṭakas were no longer in power at the time the inscription was incised. Perhaps, as Spink says, the Vākāṭakas were thrown out by the mechanisation and aggression of the Aśmakarājā. Collins (1907), Mirashi (1945), and Spink⁴⁹ have all concluded that

references to such a historical event are indirectly and metaphorically represented in Daṇḍīn's *Daśakumāraśarita*.⁵⁰

Verse 14

Āgamyā Dharmmadattaṃ chcha(cha) bhikṣuṃ sach-chhi-
shyam=eva cha [*] Bha⁴drabu(ba)ndhum=idaṃ veśma tābhyāṃ nishpāditāṃ cha me || [14 ||*]

Thanks to the monk Dharmadatta as well as to (my) good pupil Bhadrabandhu; for it is these two who have seen to the excavation and completion of this (cave) temple on my behalf.⁵¹
[(Yazdani 1952, 118)]

Dharmadatta and Bhadrabandhu, the first 'great masters' of Indian art? The inscription makes careful acknowledgements to the donor's parents, the eternal friend Bhavvirāja, Aśmakarājā himself, and to all the sentient beings in whose honour and for whose benefit the "sugatālaya" was claimed to have been erected for the service of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. In such a very special place, installed like a plaque on the entrance of the grand monument, we find one whole verse devoted to expressing a special gratitude for Dharmadatta and Bhadrabandhu. The former is simply described as a "bhikṣu" while the latter is described as Buddhabhadra's own 'chhishya' (śiśya or pupil). Dharmadatta is named first, which is not apparently a chance. If the donor Buddhabhadra himself did not take carry out the role of the architect, he seems to have delegated the job to Dharmadatta in which case the latter was the architect, draftsman, planner, engineer, and organizer—all together (not a wonder in the ancient

times). Bhadrabandhu then, the pupil of Buddhābhadda, might have acted in a supervisory role for the excavation of the sumptuous cave temple.

The two are said to have carried out (*'nishpaditam'*) the assigned task on the donor's behalf. Those who carry out the task of building, particularly who are capable and skilled enough to execute the building of this sort—which was originally so complex, palatial, and one of a kind in the last many centuries—cannot do so without the requisite training, expertise, and prior experience. In this context, they cannot be described as simple *bhikṣus*. They must have been reputed for undertaking ambitious building projects before the task was entrusted to them. We are not informed about the range of their skills. However, the Buddha, according to *Āḥavagga*, had prescribed that *bhikṣus* must themselves undertake the tasks of painting, image making, and building.

The capabilities of Dharmadatta and Bhadrabandhu are also readily understood by the exceptional gesture of acknowledgement to them by the patron as well as by the proof of their remarkable achievement existing in the form of the monument itself. In ancient times, there was no strict boundary among the occupations of *vāstu*, image making, and performing arts. Ancient texts and a large corpus of epigraphs inform us that a person was often skilled in

multiple arts. Dharmadatta and Bhadrabandhu must also have been skilled in *pratimā-vijnāna*, *vāstu*, carpentry, mathematics, sciences, and *jyotiṣh*.

Was Dharmadatta also a donor of images at Ajantā? The question is raised since there are at least two Buddha images carved on the façade and interior of Cave 26 *śaityagrha* that bear this name in the dedicatory inscription below the images. The same name also appears in the dedicatory inscriptions below some other “intrusive” sculptures in other caves. It is almost settled after Spink’s research that these images were not the part of original plans. That is why they are called ‘intrusive.’⁵² Perhaps these images bearing the name of Dharmadatta as donor were sponsored and dedicated by our own planner/ supervisor of Cave 26. He might have impelled to do so in the aftermath of the site’s unfortunate collapse toward the end of the Vākāṭaka Hariṣeṇa’s rule in the province. In ordinary circumstances, our Dharmadatta or any other person by this name would not have done it; because such “intrusive sculptures” found in most of the caves were essentially a kind of aesthetic vandalism, decimating the original plan of the edifices. In the last years of the site, it was sadly a no-man’s land, and hence just any place was suitable for carving such intrusive sculptures when the original patrons were no more around and the purpose of the last remaining people was simply to earn some religious

merits of their own, when they could, before fleeing from the place. However, a counter-argument is equally welcome:

Dharmadatta may have been a popular name in the era, and the images bearing this name could have been the work of another person!

Be that as it may, if one closely studies the intricacies, details, and development process of Cave 26-complex, its history and uniqueness, there would be no doubt left that it was a marvel of the times, and its fame must have spread far and wide in its own times—no matter how short-lived the life of the site was within the intriguing Vākāṭaka phase. A number of troubles came close while the edifice was being excavated, but every problem was boldly and cleverly dealt with, as can be found in (Singh 2012b).⁵³

We do not know the name of any great master from this antiquity who is responsible for the creation of a grand monument of great scale and beauty. We can feel settled that the inscription read at par with the monument provide us with the names of the first 'great masters' of Indian art.