



ROCK-CUT ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA

Mrs. P. Matha Marial, MA.,M.Phil.,

Assistant Professor,

Department of History,

Nadar Saraswathi College of Arts and Science, Theni, India

ABSTRACT

The greatest example of prehistoric Indian art is seen in the rock-cut monuments. Numerous religious activities and numerous religions were closely linked to the majority of the rock-cut buildings. Originally, great rock-cut Buddhist and Jain temples were constructed in places like Maharashtra in the west and Bihar in the east. The Buddhist monks excavated a great number of caves for their habitation and devotion. Known to exist in India are about 1,500 rock-cut monuments. Exquisite stone carvings adorn the majority of these structures, which house internationally significant artwork. The structural engineering and craftsmanship of these historic and medieval buildings are astounding. Caves have been considered sacred sites in India for a very long time. Caves in India are usually associated with three different religions, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism and reflect architectural variance in accordance with respective religions. The earliest caves comprising of cave temples that are associated with Buddhism include the Karla Caves, the Kanheri Caves, the Bhaja Caves, the Bedsa Caves and the Ajanta Caves, Nasik Caves, Barabar Caves. These included sectionalizing areas for specific purposes like the Viharas and Chaityas. Actually, every Indian religious building has a sanctuary. The architects of the Pallava Dynasty initiated rock carving to create monolithic structures that resemble temples.

Key words: rock-cut, monuments, Caves, religions,

INTRODUCTION

Indian rock-cut architecture, a unique form of structural engineering, is abundant and diverse, with over 1,500 structures known worldwide. Mostly religious, these structures feature intricate stone carvings and artwork. Caves in India, both natural and man-made, hold a sense of sanctity, with sanctuary in all Indian religious structures remaining small and dark without natural light. Rock-cut architecture, dating back to the 3rd century BC, includes early Buddhist shrines and monasteries in the western Deccan. Despite the destruction of wooden structures, rock-cut temples retained their wooden elements. The Ellora Caves and Kailash Temple were the last significant rock-cut excavated temples, with the last being the Kailash.

Early caves

The earliest caves employed by humans were natural caves used by local inhabitant for a variety of purposes such as shrines and shelters. The early caves included overhanging rock decorated with rock-cut art and the use of natural caves during the Mesolithic period (6000 BC). Their use has continued in some areas into historic times. The Rock Shelters of Bhimbetka, a World Heritage Site, are on the edge of the Deccan Plateau where deep erosion has left huge sandstone outcrops. The many caves and grottos found there contain primitive tools and decorative rock paintings that reflect the ancient tradition of human interaction with their landscape, an interaction that continues to this day.

Mauryan Age

The oldest surviving Indian rock-cut caves are the Barabar Caves that are situated in the Indian state of Bihar. Some of these caves, most of which trace back to the 3rd century BC during the rule of the Maurya Empire (322–185 BCE), bear Ashokan inscriptions. These caves from the time of the great Indian emperor Ashoka and his grandson, Dasharatha speak volume of the policy of religious tolerance undertaken by the two emperors who were otherwise Buddhists. Different Jain sects also thrived under their rule.

Cave Temple

Buddhist missionaries in the Western Ghats adapted caves to serve as temples and abodes for asceticism and monastic life. The topography of the region, including the Kanheri Caves and those at Ajanta, was suitable for their natural inclinations. As their mercantile and royal endowments grew, cave interiors became more elaborate, with paintings, reliefs, and intricate carvings. Over time, simple caves resembled three-dimensional buildings, requiring skilled artisans to complete. Early examples of rock-cut architecture include Buddhist and Jain caves, temples, and monasteries, many with Chandra Halas. Cave temples are well-preserved due to their durability and less visible nature. There are around 1200 cave temples still in existence, mostly Buddhist.

Importance of caves in ancient India

Buddhist missionaries used caves as shrines and shelters for asceticism and monastic life. Early rock-cut architecture in Kanheri and Ajanta features Buddhist monks. The caves indicate association between religion and commerce, as Buddhist monasteries often provided lodging for traders on trade routes. The Bhaja Caves, located 400 feet above Bhaja village, is an example of this association.

Later caves

Many cave temples were later developed under the patronisation of southern Indian Hindu kings and were dedicated to Hindu gods and goddesses. Striking sculptures adorning these cave temples including that of Tandava-dancing Shiva as Nataraja in Cave 1 and relief of Vishnu as Trivikrama in Cave 2 among others illustrate Hindu themes and divinities.

Monolithic Rock-Cut Temples

The architects of the Pallava Dynasty initiated rock carving to create monolithic structures that resemble temples. A monolithic rock-cut temple is chiselled out of a single colossal rock in the shape of masonry or wooden

temples including embellishment on walls and other areas showcasing fine work of art and engineering. The five structures shaped as Rathas or chariots chiselled out of large block of stone of granite dates back to the 7th century and are named after the five Pandava brothers and their common spouse Draupadi from the great Indian epic 'Mahabharata'. Dedicated to Lord Shiva, the temple showcases fine architectural works including relief panels depicting the two main Hindu Epics namely the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Pallava and Chalukya styles of architecture are noticed in this cave temple which is decorated with carved sculptures including that of gods and goddesses from the Hindu Puranas, mystical beings such as divine musicians and nymphs and figures depicting fertility and good fortune.

Ajanta Caves

Ajanta caves were inscribed by the Buddhist monks, under the patronage of the Vakataka kings – Harishena being a prominent one. Reference of the Ajanta caves can be found in the travel accounts of Chinese Buddhist travellers Fa Hien (during the reign of Chandragupta II; 380- 415 CE) and Hieun Tsang (during the reign of emperor Harshavardhana; 606 - 647 CE). The outlines of the paintings were done in red colour. One of the striking features is the absence of blue colour in the paintings.

Ellora Caves (8th century CE)

Ellora (also known as Elura and, in ancient times, as Elapura) is a sacred site in Maharashtra, central India. The Ellora Caves are listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site and is celebrated for its Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain temples and monuments which were carved from the local cliff rock in the 6th to 8th century CE. The most spectacular example is the 8th century CE Kailasa temple which, at 32 metres high, is the largest rock-cut monument in the world. Located in the Sahyadri hills near Aurangabad, Ellora is the most important second-wave site of ancient rock-cut architecture in India. In the western face of one hill, composed of volcanic Basalt rock, there are 35 caves and rock-cut temples, largely produced during the reign of the Kalachuri dynasty in the 6th and 7th centuries CE. Typical of early Hindu temples there is an inner sanctum (garbhagriha), a circumambulatory corridor for worshippers to walk around, vestibules with double porticoes, and extensive decoration via high-relief friezes and carvings depicting scenes from the Puranas sacred texts. Cave 21 has carved river goddesses on the exterior, a Nandi sculpture at the entrance and inside are both a large dancing Shiva surrounded by musicians and Durga slaying the buffalo demon king. The figure brackets of cave 21 are additional evidence of a cultural link between the two sites.

Elephanta cave: Maharashtra

The island of Elephanta, the glorious abode of Lord Shiva and an epitome of Hindu cave culture, consists of seven caves on an island in the Sea of Oman close to Mumbai which, with their decorated temples and the images from Hindu mythology, bear a unique testimony to a civilization that has disappeared. Here, Indian art has found one of its most perfect expressions, particularly in the huge high reliefs in the main cave. The island of Gharapuri, the 'City of Caves', situated about 10 km from Mumbai on the east side of the harbour, owes its name to the enormous stone elephant found there by Portuguese navigators. The date of the famous Elephanta Caves is

still very much debated and varies from the 6th century to the 8th century according to different specialists. To the west, the larger group consists of five rock-cut Hindu shrines. The main cave is universally famous for its carvings to the glory of Shiva, who is exalted in various forms and actions.

Kanheri Caves: Maharashtra

Kanheri Caves constitute a group of 109 rock-cut monuments located inside the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, north of Mumbai. Built between the 1st century BC and 9th century AD, the Kanheri Caves demonstrate the Buddhist influence on the art and culture of India and offer picnickers a getaway, especially during the rainy season. Majority of the caves are monasteries, intended for living, study and meditation. All of them have elaborately carved sculptures, reliefs and pillars and encompass rock-cut stupas for worship.

Karla Caves, Maharashtra

Karla Caves are one of the ancient caves in Lonavala of Maharashtra that follows the mixed Hindu and Buddhists style of rock-carved caves architecture. The group at Karla consists of 16 rock-cut excavations of which cave 8 is the chaityagriha which was carved during Satavahanas dynasty (271 BCE to 30 BCE). These caves are some of the largest rock-cut Buddhist shrines in India. The monasteries at Karla could be datable between circa 60-40 B.C. and 4th century A.D.

Bhaja Caves, Maharashtra

Bhaja Cave is a group of 22 rock-cut caves dating back to the 2nd century BC located in Pune, near Lonavala, Maharashtra. These caves are cut in steep cliff face 120 m above the surrounding plain, all looking to the west. The most impressive monument is the large shrine chaityagriha, a prayer hall with a stupa at one end. The other awe-inspiring features of the Bhaja caves is a group of 14 stupas, five inside and nine outside an irregular excavation.

Lenyadri caves, Maharashtra

Lenyadri Caves represents about 30 Buddhist rock-cut caves, which are situated in the district of Pune in the state of Maharashtra at Junnar. 26 of the total of 30 caves are serially numbered from the east to the west. The caves numbered 6-14 are the chapels, which are known as chaitya-grihas and the rest of the caves are the dwelling places for the monks and are known as viharas. These viharas are crafted in the form of cells. It is one of the shrines in the set of eight noteworthy religious places known as Ashtavinayak in the western part of Maharashtra.

Pandavleni Caves, Maharashtra

The Pandavleni caves are a group of 24 caves which were carved between the 3rd and 2nd Century AD. Although these caves are located near one of the holiest Hindu sites and have a name of Hindu deity, these rock-cut temples initially were started by Jains and later turned into rather significant centre of Buddhism. The main cave or the 'Chaitya' (prayer hall) is the best of all the caves as it has a beautiful Stupa located within. The site

has an excellent ancient water management system and skillfully chiseled out of solid rock are several attractive water tanks.

Badami Caves - Early Chalukya Capital (6th century CE) Karnataka

Carved out of the soft sandstone of these hill cliffs, the four cave temples of Badami were built by the son of Pulakesi I – Kirthivarman (ruled in 567 – 598 AD) and his brother Mangalesha I (ruled in 598 – 610 AD). Badami Caves represent the secular nature of the rulers then, with tolerance and a religious following that inclines towards Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

Junagadh Caves: Gujarat

Uparkot (meaning ‘citadel’) is an ancient fortress which was the scene of historic sieges between the middle of the 14th and end of the 16th century AD. Its entrance, in the form of an archway, is a fine specimen of the Hindu torana. Uparkot has many interesting Buddhist caves and was evidently the site of a Buddhist monastery in ancient times. Some of the caves, apparently, were two or three storeys high. Belonging to about AD 300, their outstanding features are the halls, connected by winding staircases. In the upper chamber is a small refractory and a tank surrounded by a corridor, all supported by six richly carved columns indicative of fine craftsmanship.

Mahābalipuram – the Pallavas (600-900 CE)

The next notable development in rock-cut architecture occurs much later chronologically (600-900 CE), as well as much further south, at Mahabalipuram, under the reign of the Pallavas of Kanchi. The Pallava architects started the carving of rock for the creation of monolithic copies of structural temples (the 5 Rathas), which are now known as the ‘Five Rathas of Mahābalipuram’ or the ‘Seven Pagodas’. The ‘Pancharathas’ is an example of monolithic Indian rock-cut architecture dating from the late 7th century. Bhima Ratha & Arjuna Ratha, there is no timeline that divides the creation of rock-cut temples and free-standing temples built with cut stones, as they developed in parallel. The building of free-standing structures began in 5th century, while rock-cut temples continued to be excavated until the 12th century. An example of a free-standing structural temple is the Shore Temple, with its slender tower, built on the shore of the Bay of Bengal, with finely carved granite rocks, cut like bricks, and dating from 8th century.

CONCLUSION

These caves of ancient and medieval ages give us a glance of different architectural styles of different periods and religions. The relics, motifs, murals and sculptures of the caves not only enlighten us with a lot of information of those ancient times giving us an impression of various traditions, customs and lifestyles followed by the inhabitants but also illustrate considerable accomplishment with regard to structural engineering and artistry of those times thus attracting thousands of tourists and architectural enthusiasts round the year.

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