

# Patronage and Support: Socio-Cultural Role of Kanheri Caves in the Evolving Interactions

Kishor Gaikwad

## Abstract

*A number of factors were responsible in the evolution of the first state craft in deccan locale. There were bound to be, several regional power centers beyond the main arena of Satvahna power. Their negotiation, complementing and supplementing each others need as well as with limited autonomy, enjoying their peripheral important status. Kanheri caves, specially the epigraphic evidences during Satvahna times, could be the best marker of variety of power specificities within deccan. These inscriptions made references to casts, gotras, communities, gahapaties as well as garini and kutumbini etc. These were all local social cultural forces were playing imperative roles in the larger eco-political ambiance of deccan. Its a kind of multidimensional relationship of mainstream political and cultural process, specially seprated to ecological setting. Surprisingly from these plaethora of inscriptions guilds and Satvahna royal house hold didn't carve out their space. Kanheri caves laid phenomenal role in trade and cultural interactions. The present paper as an attempt to explore socio cultural role of Kanheri caves in these interactions.*

Satvahanas were the first known statecraft in the Deccan locale. A number of factors were responsible for the rise of state or state like institutions in the Deccan. These factors may be ecological, Deccan magalithism, rise of agriculture economy & craftsmanship, new trade links and exchange of new products, etc. along with religious developments. All were catering to this process. We get information of the early Satvahana rule, which already was comprised of farming villages as well as several big and small towns. First time larger settlements and institutionalised religion were developing in the larger area of Deccan. The process of expansion of state was directly related to the growth in trade activities. It was the first time in Deccan larger territory was coming under the single political power. In this process of expansion, instead of war, state support extended with local chiefs on periphery including commercial chiefs, land owning chiefs or dominant tribal chiefs, etc. For the establishment of sovereignty, consent of the periphery or negotiation with the periphery was required. In this process of extending access, the expanding monarchy required approval of

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legitimacy from different peripheral-territorial power magnates and vice-versa. The main cause for this expansion was the development of economy with trade links. Importance of the periphery was growing due to its eco-strategic magnitude and Kanheri vicinity was one of such periphery to the Satavahana rule.

Though Mauryan king Ashoka is the main driving force for the introduction of Buddhism in Deccan locale, the number of Buddhist caves increased during Satavahana times in the region. Over eight hundred rock-cut caves are known in western Deccan. It seems it was the period of agricultural expansion, craft production and their exchange. This economic growth was handled and nurtured by not the central state in the region but the local power centres like merchants, landed power, tribal power etc. and most of the time Buddhist cave complexes were supported by these local power centres. Of course, Buddhist philosophy and doctrine was also complementary to their aspirations, especially long distance trade (taboo and caste in Vedic religion).

But the query remains unanswered about the exact relation and role of Buddhist establishment and trade and Commerce. Answer is given by Heitzman. He explains, Buddhist establishments became the platform to bring together all agencies which were involved in exchange including the state agency in a broad sense. The function of each Buddhist establishment was different according to its location, ecological setting and trade link. These establishments also may have been used for resting, repairing or changing carriers. On the contrary big cities like Pratisthan (capital of Satavahanas) was not having Buddhist establishment.

Some of the important ports during the Satavahana period include, Bharuch and Sopara. Periplus of the Erythraean Sea mentions that Kalyan (Kalliana) was also one of the important port-cities along with Chaul. Against the background of heavy trading activities along with above mentioned places, one can understand the location of Kanheri complex. When Kalyan was the key space through which one had access to the plateau via Thalghat, Naneghat and Bhoreghat, Kanheri was an important nodal point where basic care of people who involved in trade activities can be taken care of. In away Kanheri was strategically controlling the communication network.

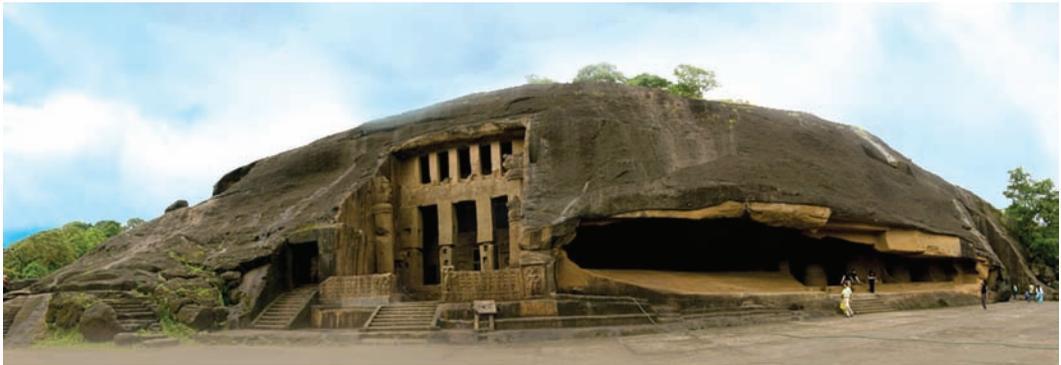
The entire Kanheri cave-complex consists of more than hundred caves. One can have a glance of the process by which Buddhism evolved in Deccan for around one millennium. Most of the caves are having front courtyards with benches, some caves are having water cisterns, small staircase till the doors of the caves, good light arrangement, very graceful sculptures, and donors' inscriptions always written on the side wall. These inscriptions are very rich sources to gather ideas for patronage and support.

Active life in Kanheri complex can be chronologically divided into three phases on the basis of cave-structures, sculptural activities and palaeography -

1. from 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. to 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.
2. from 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. to 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.
3. from 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. to 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Inscriptions tell us about the close link between not only the trading class and Buddhism but a number of artisans, who were building blocks in the larger trade. Donations from Sopara

and Chaul were given around 2<sup>nd</sup> c. A.D. was mainly for construction of reservoir, gift of cave, donation in cash from sethi, goldsmith, jeweller, merchant, etc. Kanheri was the biggest monastic establishment on the west coast located in the fertile basin of river Ulhas. Its hinterland included agrarian tracts of the region. Inscriptions mention names of innumerable villages as well as small and big urban centres. It had a large number of money donors. Apart from the market towns there is a mention of a locality in Kalyan as 'Gandharika-Bhami' which suggests a special area in the city in which people from Gandhara used to stay. At the same time, donation to their monastery in Kalyan suggests maintaining their own religious practice undisturbed. It shows not only migration but proper accommodation of the 'outsider'. In the first phase due to favourable Indo-Roman trade the traders from Sopara, Kalyan and Chaul made generous grants to the Buddhist establishments. The Periplus of Erythrean Sea has recorded that Romans anchored their ships loaded with amphorae filled with wines, metals like silver and lead in the ports of Kalyan, Sopara and Barygaza. Gautamiputra Yajnasri Satakarni was the great Satavahana ruler. The China inscription of Yajnasri is recorded in the 12<sup>th</sup> year of his reign. He also issued coins on which the figurine of two masted ship is shown.



Inscriptions did make references of the certain castes, gotras, communities and families as well as Gahapati, Gharini (Gruhini), Kutumbini. The cave no. 3's gate post mentions names of two brothers Gajasena and Gajamita who made donation to make chaitaya hall in honour of their deceased parents, their wives, their sons, daughters, step mothers, sister's sons and extended family members. The inscription in cave no. 50 says a man donated that cave along with a water cistern in honour of his mother Nandanika. The merit gained thereby was shared by 'his sons, nephew, daughters, grandsons, great-grand daughters, great grandsons, daughter-in-law and his whole family, the deceased, the living and unborn and all living beings.' Donors were teachers, monks and negama but also housewives and daughters. In cave no.2 we come across some names – Nanna, Bhanu, Bhaskara, Bharavi, Suval, Vesu, etc. According to Shobhana Gokhale, 'the names indicate their southern provenance and they indicate that the persons belonged to the sophisticated class of society and lovers of cultural life.' Surprisingly guilds are totally absent in all inscriptions. It seems the monastery owns much of the land. Inscriptions of second century A.D. mainly from caves no. 7, 11 and 21 give information of gift of fields was done on a big scale but there was no mention of the measurement or cultivation of a particular crop. This practice can be paralleled with giving agraharas.

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References to women, as donors or general references, are found in seventeen inscriptions, all belonged to second-third century A.D. These women were upasikas, from rich and royal families. Women were getting some space only in Sthaviravadi sect of Buddhism, and after that, in Mahayanist order.

Although Satavahana rulers were not Buddhists, they were supporting Buddhist monasteries. It is a kind of multidimensional relationship of mainstream political and cultural process and the various habitats and ecological niches that seem to lie beyond the mainstream political and cultural organisations. One has to look into the cultural forces that constituted the mainstream socio-political set up. This force always remain in contact with the ecological world for a variety of reasons stretching from learning to forestry, labour and trade routs, market places, etc.

Middle phase at Kanheri was associated with the building of furnaces, possibly suggesting smelting or making bricks at the site. In the middle phase Buddhism had undergone a major change. It has often been said that Sthavirvadi Buddhism declined in the western Deccan with the fall of Satavahanas. All the later rock art caves reveal Mahayana influence. The modification in the cave layout would appear that there was a marked difference in the nature of the patronage as well. Now only members of royal family were patronising the Kanheri establishments. Another feature of this phase was erection of votive stupas of brick. According to H. P. Ray, the donation of small votive stupas was major component of ritual of pilgrimage. The stone and brick stupas often contained tablets or plates inscribed with Buddhist creed, images or protective magical charms.

Later phase shows a different kind of support. The trade routs carried not only goods and people but they also carried ideas. They also developed into knowledge routs. Therefore there were a number of centres of knowledge. Every group was forming a centre of knowledge. Knowledge practices got matured into streamlined epistemological prepositions, learning, induction and doctrines gradually develops into cult. So religious agency and cultic agency started negotiating. Religion played very important role in collectivising and legitimising.

We find references of two Buddhist sects in inscriptions as Bhadrayanika and Aparashaila. Nasik was the main centre of Bhadravaniya sect and gradually Kanheri became the one of the important centre of this sect. According to the inscription in the cave no. 3, the Chaitya was donated to the monks of the Bhadravaniya sect., whereas cave no. 50 records the donation of a cave water-cistern and a cell to the Bhadravaniya sect. The Silahara inscriptions offer an authentic evidence of Vajrayana Buddhism and its academic activities. The Traikutakas established themselves alongwith the Konkan sea coast. The same cave was, renovated (cave no.3) to the second-third century A.D. but the relief was added later in the fifth century A.D.

Along with food, shelter and clothing to the Sangha, inscriptions mention donations of repair-works, windows, verandahs, almsbowl and sandals. It seems (at times) food was prepared in the monastery. Inscription in cave no. 2 speaks about mess hall whereas cave no.32 mentions 'Bhojanachatusala'. Apparently cave complex had to change its function with changing pattern of patronage as well as economy at general level. With the introduction of Mahayana Buddhism, there were elaborate sculptures in caves which illustrate the educational tradition which is significantly recorded in inscription.

Ultimately functions of structures also changed according to the activities carried out there and therefore religious order did not remain stagnant. With changing world view, new structural possibilities coordinates on the earlier one. Buddhist sect ritually grew and corresponded in architectural form. It had to adjust with philosophical and ritual growth of the society.

Sculptures of this phase are principally Avalokiteshwara, Bodhisattvas and Tara, Sravasti Miracle panel, Trinity Panel, Manushi Buddha panel, Jataka and scenes from Buddha's life. Most of these were transcription of stories at Ajanta.

Till the time when Silaharas establish themselves, it was nothing but political confusion. Pastoral made of life had set in the Deccan region. Cultural scenario was also in crises. Culture crises are characterised by dislocation in the communicational institutions of society. Many of the ideological and organisational characteristics typically associated with cult movements can be interpreted as culture crises. At this juncture, one can see two diverse religious sects merging their geographical boundaries. A number of Buddhist and Saiva caves started emerging very close to Kanheri at places such as Magathane, Mahakali (Kondivate), Lonad and Ambivali.

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It is not far from the ancient rich trade centres of Sopara, Kalyan and Chaul. To the east, across the forest-clad slopes of the black mountain (Kanhgiri) lies Tulasi lake and beyond Tulasi, there is a belt of thick forest and then there is gleam of the Vihar lake. It commands the view from the Bombay harbour to the Bassaein creek.