

PATRONS OF AJANTA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCE

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Both engraved and painted inscriptions exist at Ajanta and reveal a picture of a Buddhist site that developed under varied patronage, aristocratic, monastic and lay. In a wider context, these can be mainly divided into two groups, as individual and collective donations. Of these, according to the individual dedicatory inscriptions, it is obvious that at least some of the caves were fashioned under the patronage of *Vakataka* 'state' or at any rate with the support of 'representatives' of the same sovereignty. It is evident that apart from the religious teachings and beliefs, the promotion of art through patronage has been considered the 'duty of state' from ancient times. But, when speaking of the patronage of Buddhist art, particularly in the Indian context, it should not be forgotten that not since the time of Asoka, except for the period of Pala rule in Bihar and Bengal, could it be said the Buddhism was a 'state religion.' Nevertheless, it is evident that royal patronage in ancient India generally extended to more than a single religious sect.

Besides this glorious and magnificent royal patronage, collective and individual rich donors' patronage was also a pan-Indian phenomenon in the first few centuries AD. Consequently, with a few exceptions, the Buddhist artistic monuments produced in the various kingdoms of India were not dependent on royal patronage alone. According to the details given in the painted inscriptions at the site, it is evident that this happened even at Ajanta. Thus, in the case of several caves, a cross-section of the society, especially the monks and the lay followers have recorded their granting of gifts towards the excavation of a particular portion of a *caitya* or a *vihara* or the execution of a painting in a cave. It is obvious that though a few inscriptions recorded that some of the caves or parts of the caves were made with the support of individual donations, a majority of inscriptions recorded collective donations of specific sculptured and painted figures of the caves. However, such collective donations seemed to belong to the last phase of activity at the site when wealthy individual donors no longer participated.

In contrast, all the donors of Ajanta were in all probability Buddhists, in the sense that they were lay devotees of Buddhism or active supporters of the faith. Thus, based on an analysis of the inscriptions of Ajanta, it may be concluded that the evolution of Buddhist art and the emergence of powerful religious artistic centres need not necessarily be linked with the rise and fall of the ruling families, particularly in the Indian context, since it is obvious that the Buddhist community as a whole seems to have contributed towards the cause of the path of the Lord.