

Patronage Patterns at Karle: An Analysis of Dāna Tradition

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Received: 12 July Revised: 19 July Accepted: 25 July

Abstract

In the scholarship on Indian Epigraphy though we find scattered references of inscriptions from numerous Buddhist sites in the western Deccan reflecting upon the society, economy, religious and political conditions of the region in the period of the development of these sites. Still there is dearth of independent study of these Buddhist sites reflecting upon their present condition and their interaction with the people. By focusing on the patronage patterns at Karle I have tried to make an attempt to answer the questions arising in the minds of common people looking at these Buddhist monastic establishments. The practice of 'Dāna' tradition and the idea of attaining merit seem to be central reason behind the appearance of such structures in this region. Besides these, other factors responsible for their existence have been brought to light in this article.

Objectives and Methodology

Through an inscriptional study this work tries to examine the possible categories of donors at Karle, the status of the donors, the objects given reflecting on the material culture of the region and period concerned. A classification of donors along with their object of donation suggesting their social and economic status has been tried to be conducted under this study. It also tries to bring out the possible information provided in the Karle inscriptions and also bring in a discussion on the making of monasteries and their structural patterns. Karle seems to have been a religious centre attracting patronage from people from all the strata of the society belonging to different near and distant places.

I have used two important works on Karle inscriptions- (1) *Inscriptions from the Cave-temples of Western India* by Jas Burgess and Pandit Bhagwanlal Indraji and (2) 'The Inscriptions in the Caves at Karle' by E. Senart in *Epigraphia Indica* Vol VII. The work is also corroborated by a visit to Karle. The numbering given to the inscriptions by Indraji have been followed by Senart, except inscription 19 which is discussed precisely by Senart but not by Indraji. The same numbering has been followed in this study. There are 22 inscriptions at Karle, out of which inscription no. 21 is defaced and furnishes no useful information.

Study Area

Karle lies within the limit of Vehergaon (Vihārgānv) village and is about two and a half miles from Malavale station and five from Lonavala. The caves are located amidst green surroundings at a height of about hundred meters above a high spur of the chain of hills on the north flank of the Indrayani valley. They generally face west. These are in a line with the caitya hall in the

centre and have a sufficiently wide area in front of them. A walk of 20 minutes crossing three temples finally leads to the monastic establishment of Karle. Many caves are inaccessible presently. Besides there is an Ekavira temple beside the main chaitya at Karle, the deity of which is believed to be made out of the other entrance pillar of the chaitya hundreds of years ago. Most of the excavations at Karle belong to the Hinayāna phase of Buddhism. This site attracts attention of general people more because of Ekavira temple than the Karle caves.

Inscriptions are considered as one of the most important source of writing history. They are the mirrors to the contemporary society and give a better understanding of the historical period. The Western Deccan inscriptions are primarily records of gifts to monastic establishments. There are certain norms which are reflected in the inscriptions. Many inscriptions record details of donations. Sometimes they elaborate upon the concept of 'dāna' and its central aim of attaining spiritual merit. This concept is central to the Buddhist inscriptions of the western Deccan broadly till 4th century AD. These inscriptions are Buddhist, in the Brāhmī script and Prākṛit or hybrid language. The period discussed in this paper is also of great significance because of the increasing trading activities and changes in the patterns of patronage and dominion in the region. The site under study is in the present state of Maharashtra.

Introduction

Karle caves are among the oldest Buddhist caves in India belonging to 2nd century BC to 4th century AD. The Sātavāhanas ruled in this phase. Though it is a small monastic unit but it is one of the most famous centres of early rock-cut architecture and has received the attention of many scholars and art historians. One of the most important characteristic of Karle is that it has the biggest and the most ornate of all the chaitya-griha of the Sātavāhana period. An inscription recording a gift of a rock-mansion by SēthBhūtapāla from Vejayanti mentions it to be the most excellent in Jambudvīpa.¹

In the early historical period, a close relationship between the port settlements and Buddhist monastic establishments is suggested. The location of Karle is also important for its rich embellishment; it is on the ancient highway connecting seaports of Kalyan and Sopara to the inland cities. Near Kalyan the Sahyadri range is straddled by three natural passes--Thalghat, Nanaghat and Bhorghat. The Karle caves can be approached from the coast through the Bhorghat.² The gradual decline of the cave complexes is evident with the decline of trade.

Karle consists of sixteen rock-cut excavations. All the excavations cannot be chronologically arranged. Some interesting excavations are like Cave 8 which is the great ChaityaHall, a neatly executed monument endowed with beauty and majesty. Cave 15 is now reached from cave 13 and 14 by a staircase but originally it must have been approached by an upper ledge path. It consists of a rectangular hall with two cells cut on either side or four at the back. All cells are reached by a single step. Five of the eight cells have stone benches. An inscription on the east wall of the cave sets the date of the excavation as the 24th year of VāsiṣṭhīputraPuḷumāvi (154 AD).³ The inscription talks about a nine-celled maṇḍapa donated by a lay-worshipper Harapharaṇa, son of Setapharaṇa, a Sovasaka, living in Abulāmā to the universal Saṅgha of Mahāsaṅghikas.⁴ The inscription is further translated by Indraji that it was completed in 21st year by Harapharaṇa along with Budharakhita and his mother, an upāsikā. And in addition the meritorious gift of another passage by the mother of Budharakhita is mentioned. It seems that that though the gift was ready in the 21st year but must have been due to a landslide the path to

this nine-celled maṇḍapa was destroyed and thereafter one of the cells was converted into a staircase which was donated by the mother of Budharakhita and hence donated in the 24th year.

Some kind of hierarchy is suggested if we look at the Buddhist monastic complexes. For instance the vihāra just beside the chaitya cannot be for the ordinary monks but for the functionaries of the monastic activities. The residential complex little away from the chaitya would have been for the subordinates.

Patronage Patterns: Donors and their objects of donation

The inscriptions at Karle specifically mention the feature of the monastery (cave, pillar, cistern etc) being given for the construction of the monastery by donors. There are seven inscriptions recording the gift of pillars- lion pillar by Agimitraṇaka, son of Goti, a Mahārathi.⁵ The other pillar is a gift of Bhāyilā, mother of a gṛihasthaMahādevaṇaka. He must be of brahmanical origin because gahapati is the term used elsewhere to denote a householder of Vaiśya class.⁶ But gahapati is defined as an independent social category by Uma Chakravarti.⁷ A pillar is a donated by Sihadhaya, a Yavana from Dhenukākaṭa.⁸ The cost of the pillar is given by Sātimita from Sopāra.⁹ A pillar containing relics is donated by the same donor.¹⁰ The association of the donor shown with the BhadantaDhammutariya is significant in this inscription. A pillar is a gift of Dhamma, a Yavana from Dhenukākaṭa.¹¹ DhammaYavana could be a community of Buddhist Yavana or Buddhist Yavana who had abandoned his original name. Another pillar is gifted by Mitadevaṇaka, son of Usabhadatta (Rishabhadatta) from Dhenukākaṭa. Since it does not show any link with Nahapāna, it can be dated to after the downfall of the Khaharātas.¹² All these pillars are in the main chaitya. One inscription at Karle suggest the gift of sculpture of two elephants and rail patterns above and below them at the entrance of the chaitya by BhadantaIndradēva.¹³ Two pairs of male and female figures (deyadhammithuna) are donated by BhikshuBhadasam.¹⁴ Three inscriptions record the gift of rail pattern (vēdikā) by nuns.¹⁵ Two mention the gift of doorways one's is by a perfumer Sihadata from Dhenukākaṭa,¹⁶ and the other by Sāmika, son of Vēṇuvāsa, a native of Dhenukākaṭa.¹⁷ Three inscriptions record the gift of villages which are made by royals only. One is a nine-celled maṇḍapa by a layman (upāsaka),¹⁸ and one the rock-mansion by Séṭhi.

The last two inscriptions above suggest that lodgings were considered to be the greatest gift a donor could give to the *saṅgha*. Lodgings are so much harder to give, entailing substantial resources and labour. This often provided the donor with a bit of fame and immortality, especially if the donor's name is attached to the residence.¹⁹

Senart argues that 'Mahārathi' is a title because the names are accompanied by the name of the tribe or the people to which he belongs, therefore it should be an honorific or noble title. The word 'ṇaka' in the names suggest that the people with such names must have belonged to the same family.²⁰

The Sātavahanas initiated the practice of donating villages as early as the first century B.C. H.P. Ray suggests that though the grants of villages was not profitable in order to monitor new settlements and their development, monasteries were suited to the consolidation and integration of agricultural settlements, on account of their ability to forge channels of communication, which were used not only to popularize improved methods of agriculture and cropping patterns, but also to reinforce the authority of the state. Hence the Sātavahanas gifted villages to the *saṅgha*.²¹

There are three inscriptions at Karle depicting royal donors. Inscription 13 commemorates the previous acts of Usabhadāta, the son of Dinika and son-in-law of the King, the Khaharāta, the Kshatrapa Nahapāna. Khaharāta must have been the family name of Nahapāna. This inscription records the gift of a village Karajika to the ascetics from the four quarters residing in the leṇa. Senart points out that the ascetics talked about here are the Mahāsāṅghika monks.²² The Village Karajika is identified as Karanj close to Beḍsa while Senart tries to identify it same as the village Karajaka mentioned in inscription 19. Inscription 19 (Senart) points out that the Sātavāhana monarchs sometimes granted land together with certain *parihāras* or exemptions. It records the gift of the village Karajaka in the Māmāla district, the property of the village is secured as monk's land (Mahāsāṅghikas dwelling in the caves of Valūraka (Karle)). It was not to be entered by royal officers and was to enjoy all kinds of immunity. This gift is a command to the officer thus ordered verbally and then written and the deed was executed by Sivakhadaguta,²³ Inscription 14 records a gift of a village to the saṅgha of Valūraka, which is for the repair works at Valūrakaleṇas. The donor is Mahārāṭhi Somadēva, son of Vāsiṭhi and Mahārāṭhi Mitadēva son of Kosiki, of the Okhaḷakiyas (name of a country or tribe).²⁴ The majority of the land grants are made by royals but endowments offered by members of the public are also not absent from other Buddhist sites in the Western Deccan. The above inscriptions record royals, close-relations of the king and officers as donors, local administrators who carried out the terms of the grant. In most of the cases the donee is the monastic community living at Valūraka.

H P Ray says that the term Yavana in the inscriptions denotes Greeks and Indo-Greeks. There is no information on their profession or their mode of livelihood. She suggests that the Yavana presence in the Western Deccan coincides with the spurt in the external trade as reflected from the donations and they were vying for acceptability and inclusion in the trading network.

Sometimes we have more than one donor for a cave as in the Karle chaitya cave, since it is huge and expensive. In this case most of the decisions were taken by the higher authorities and the chief architects but a main donor is also present. For the rest we have the supporting donors who have donated different monastic features to give it a final appearance.

The inscriptions show that there were two categories of religious donors (monks and nuns) who resided in the monasteries and the others were the laity. Three inscriptions at Karle records gifts by nuns. The object of donation is railing in both the cases. Inscription 18 mentions the gift of a vēdika by nun Koḍī, mother of Ghuṅka, made by Nandika. A Nun mentioned in Inscription 12 is Āsāḍhamitā. The third is a defaced one but suggests the gift by a woman.²⁵ Scholars have suggested that monks and nuns possessed at least some means to be in a position to make certain gifts. These monks participating in such activities are different from the ideal monks and nuns who appear on the basis of textual material alone.

Huntington points out that those who attained the status of upāsaka/upāsikā would have wanted this information included in the records of their donations. Like monks and nuns these are also absent in the pictorial art and present in the donative inscriptions.²⁶

Thus a thorough study of the inscriptions indicates that the donations were made largely by five categories of donors at Karle namely, royalty, officials, merchants and craftsmen, members of the monastic community (including nuns) and Yavanas. Valuable gifts by the merchants (Sēṭhi) and members of their families in favour of the religious establishments show that the trading communities would have been wealthy despite political disturbances after 2nd century AD.

Places mentioned in the Karle inscriptions

There are five inscriptions (inscription 4, 6, 7, 10, 11) at Karle with the donors hailing from Dhenukākaṭa. The donor in inscription 20 belongs to Abulāmā. Karajika and Karajaka are the villages mentioned in inscription 13 and 19 respectively. Sopara is the place mentioned in two inscriptions (inscription 8, 9). The donor of the great chaitya at Karle hails from Vejayanti (ancient name of Banavāsi in the north Kanara district, Bombay).²⁷ But now it is in Karnataka. Valūraka is the ancient name of Karle as mentioned in the inscriptions. Though we find donors from Dhenukākaṭa at other Buddhist sites in the western Deccan, why are most donors majorly from Dhenukākaṭa at Karle as compared to other places. One probability can be that the inhabitants of Dhenukākaṭa (a yavanacentre) wanted to get accepted in the local society by paying patronage to Buddhism. There is a controversy about the identification of Dhenukākaṭa.

Buddhist sects mentioned in the Karle inscriptions

Of the eighteen schools or sects into which Buddhism was at one time divided, two are known from these inscriptions. They are: Mahāsaṅghika and Dharmottarīya. Of these the first belongs to the Mahāsaṅghika group and the second to the Theravāda group.²⁸ Inscription 8 records the gift of the price of a pillar, out of respect by Sātimita, the disciple and sister's son of BhadaṅtaDhamutaraya, along with his mother and father. The name of the Bhadaṅta signifies his connection with the Dharmottarīya sect.²⁹

Making of the Monastic Establishments

The question arises how such magnificent monastic complexes were made. It is said that they were constructed under the supervision of some monk with a high position in the *saṅgha*. Were there any contacts of the monastic community with the sculptors and artisans, if so then how? The location of the caves must have been decided after a discussion among the donor, the chief architect and the higher authorities of the monastery. The higher authorities must have had some ideas about the cave and its utility. The fixing of the location was the work of higher authorities of the monastery. Other works were probably handled by the chief architect along with others. After considering the will of the donor and the requirements as suggested by the higher authorities, the chief architect decided the plan of the cave. Since the donations of various monastic features is made at these Buddhist sites so there must have been some authority or administrative committee to look after and maintain such donations. Artisans must have paid with their services if they stayed in the monasteries. The fortification of the monastic establishment suggests some kind of protection was ensured.

The economic role of the monasteries has been discussed by many scholars. Monasteries were not only religious centres but also trade centres which actively facilitated trading activities being in close proximity to the trade routes. They were also agricultural facilitators. Here it should be noted that these complexes cannot serve as the resting places for the travelers.

Fogelin basically emphasizes on the monastery and its position within a broader social landscape and tries to figure out the complex and continuous interaction of the monasteries and the surrounding communities through the conduct of daily mundane ritual. He points out that the life in monasteries was rigidly ordered and suggests the existence of a division of monastic labor in the early historic period.³⁰ He suggests that Buddhist pilgrimage sites and monasteries

served as locations for merit-making, creating binding ritual ties between the Buddhist clergy and laity. But here the places of contact on daily basis must have existed on the way to the main complex. These would have served as the places of contacts between the monks and the laity.

It can be suggested that the vihāras must not have been the place of residence of ordinary monks but of the qualified and revered monks. Fogelin acknowledges Schopen's suggestion that those monks with the greatest ties outside the monastery were most likely enshrined within it and the laity had free access to at least that portion of the monastery that contained the *stūpa*. The remains of prominent monks were to be placed in *stūpas* within the monastery while the small *stūpas* of ordinary monks could be placed outside the monastery walls.³¹

The organization of the space for different purposes for the monastic community is suggested if we look at the structural patterns at Karle. The donation by people of different communities and social strata as well as by the royals suggests that the necessities of the monastic communities were the priority of all the donors irrespective of their status.

Conclusion

It has been rightly suggested by Findly and other scholars also that through material support to the Saṅgha, the householder earned a clear place in the new religious landscape. A social contract was established between the *saṅgha* and society: you invest (material) in the *saṅgha* and society will invest in you (reputation).³² Though epigraphical material does not speak of the intention of the donor, what should be given, to whom the gift should be given or when it should be given but describes the actual instances of the gifts made by a whole range of people. They help us to know what people actually practiced. There is a gap between what inscriptions say and what Vinaya texts talk about the monastic community. Therefore a combination of the visual narratives, architectural material, textual sources and the epigraphical material can give us a better view of this significant tradition of 'dāna' in Buddhism. The limitation while dealing with all the above sources is that there would have been other kinds of face-to-face donations, donation of labour, the actual evidence of which cannot be traced. Such people do not find direct mention in the inscriptions but they contributed to the development of the Buddhist monasticism.

Notes and References

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