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## ASHOKA THE GREAT : REPRESENTING THE ACME OF INDIAN CULTURE

Ashoka occupies a unique place in the history of India. His policies of universal peace, non-violence and religious harmony find no parallel in the monarchs of the world.

Ashoka stands out as a monarch who combined successful kingship with idealism and philosophy. Like other rulers, Ashoka too began his reign with war - the conquest of Kalinga. However, the mindless destruction of life and property in this war shattered him so greatly that he vowed never to wage any war again. Instead he adopted the policy of Dhamma Vijaya that is conquest through dhamma.

In his thirteenth major Rock Edict, Asoka states that true conquest is by piety (the quality of being religious or reverent) and virtue.

Such a decision taken by a king, who lived in an era where military might was the measure of power, earned him a unique place in history.

Ashoka was a true humanist. His policies were oriented towards the welfare of his people. His dhamma was based on **social responsibility**. Besides giving importance to respecting brahmins, and servants, obedience to elders, abstention from killing living beings, dhamma also asked people to live in **religious harmony**. It combined in itself the good points of all sects. Ashoka proved to be a tolerant monarch who, although himself a Buddhist, never sought to impose his personal religion on his subjects.

**In his twelfth major Rock Edict, he states that in honouring of other sects lies the honour of one's own sect.**

As a king, Ashoka set a very high ideal for himself. **He saw himself as a father and the subjects as his children**. He communicated his thoughts and philosophy to his people by inscribing them on stone pillars and rock surfaces. These edicts are remarkable examples of Mauryan architecture and also of engineering skills. They are the living monuments of his times.

Ashoka attempted to educate his subjects by **pointing out the wastefulness of expensive rituals**. He asked people to practice ahimsa. He himself gave up the practices of the royal hunt and pleasure tours and instead began **Dhamma Yattas** tours for the furtherance of Dhamma. By giving his **empire a common Dhamma, a common language, and practically one script (Brahmi)** he brought further political unification. India has been a secular country since the Buddhist age. Though he himself became a Buddhist he did not impose it on the others but followed a tolerant religious policy. He made gifts and grants to non Buddhist as well as anti-Buddhist.

Ashoka's fame also rests on the measures that he took to spread the message of peace amongst the different regions of the world. He sent ambassadors to the Greek kingdoms and the West. Indian culture spread to far-away lands. According to a Buddhist tradition, Asoka sent Buddhist missions to regions such as Sri Lanka and Central Asia. Buddhism spread to different parts of the world and although it is no longer a major force in India today, yet it continues to be popular in Sri Lanka and the Far Eastern countries.

The Varna system popularly known as the caste system which had arisen in the Vedic Age now became well established and gradually became the dominant form of social organization throughout India. Along with the new religions and philosophy the growth of cities, crafts and trade furthered the process of cultural unity in our country. Asoka unified the entire country under one empire and renounced the use of war as state policy.

On the other hand he says that **he strives to discharge the debt he owes to all living creatures.**

## ARTS OF THE MAURYAN PERIOD

SIXTH century BCE marks the beginning of new religious and social movements in the Gangetic valley in the form of Buddhism and Jainism which were part of the “**shraman tradition**”. Both religions became popular as they opposed the *varna* and *jati* systems of the Hindu religion. Magadha emerged as a powerful kingdom and consolidated its control over the other regions.

By the fourth century BCE the Mauryas established their power and by the third century BCE, a large part of India was under Mauryan control. **Ashoka emerged as the most powerful king of the Mauryan dynasty who patronised the shraman tradition in the third century BCE.**

**Coomaraswmy** argued that the Mauryan art may be said to exhibit three main phases.

1. The first phase was the **continuation of the Pre-Mauryan tradition**, which is found in some instances to the representation of the Vedic deities (the most significant examples are the **reliefs of Surya and Indra at the Bhaja Caves.**)
2. The second phase was the **court art of Ashoka**, typically found in the monolithic columns on which his edicts are inscribed
3. The third phase was the **beginning of brick and stone architecture**, as in the case of the original stupa at Sanchi, the small monolithic rail at Sanchi and the Lomash Rishi cave in the Barabar Caves, with its ornamentated facade, reproducing the forms of wooden structure.

The Mauryan contribution to art and architecture was significant. Ashoka is known to have built 84,000 stupas to commemorate various events of Buddha's life. According to Megasthenes, Pataliputra's grandeur matched that of the cities of Persia.

## Royal Palace

1. Megasthenes mentions that the capital city of Pataliputra was **encircled by a massive timber-palisade**, pierced by loopholes through which archers could shoot.
2. It had 64 gates and 570 towers.
3. According to Strabo, **the gilded pillars of the palace were adorned with golden vines and silver birds.**
4. The palace stood in an **extensive park studded with fish ponds**. It was furnished with a great variety of ornamental trees and shrubs.
5. Excavations carried out by Spooner and Waddell have brought to light remains of **huge wooden buildings at "Bulandibagh" and "Kumrahar", both near Patna.**
6. The remains of one of the buildings, an 80 pillared hall at Kumrahar are of particular significance. Out of 80 stone columns, that once stood on a wooden platform and supported a wooden roof, Spooner was able to discover the entire lower part of at least one in almost perfect conditions. It is more or less similar to an Ashokan pillar, smooth, polished and made of grey Chunar sandstone.

Religious practices had many dimensions and were not confined to just one particular mode of worship. Worship of Yakshas and mother-goddesses were prevalent during that time. So, multiple forms of worship existed. Nevertheless, Buddhism became the most popular social and religious movement.

*Yaksha* worship was very popular before and after the advent of Buddhism and it was assimilated in Buddhism and Jainism.

## Pillars, Sculptures and Rock-cut Architecture

Coomaraswamy distinguishes between **court art** and a more **popular art** during the Mauryan period. Court art is represented by the pillars and their capitals. Popular art is represented by the works of the local sculptors like chauri (whisk)-bearer from Didarganj.

Construction of **stupas** and **viharas** as part of monastic establishments became part of the Buddhist tradition. However, in this period, apart from **stupas and viharas**, **stone pillars, rock-cut caves and monumental figure sculptures** were carved at several places.

### Pillars

The tradition of constructing pillars is very old and it may be observed that **erection of pillars was prevalent in the Achaemenian empire** as well. But the Mauryan pillars are different from the Achaemenian pillars.

- The Mauryan pillars are rock-cut pillars thus displaying the carver's skills, whereas the Achaemenian pillars are constructed in pieces by a mason.

Stone pillars were erected all over the Mauryan Empire with **inscriptions engraved on them**.

1. These pillars were carved in two types of stone.

- Some were of the **spotted red and white sandstone** from the region of **Mathura**, the others of **buff-coloured fine grained hard sandstone** usually with small black spots quarried in the **Chunar near Varanasi**.

- The uniformity of style in the pillar capitals suggests that they were all sculpted by craftsmen from the same region.
  - It would therefore seem, that stone transported from Mathura and Chunar to the various sites where the pillars have been found and here the stone was cut and carved by craftsmen
2. The top portion of the pillar was carved with **capital figures** like the bull, the lion, the elephant, etc.
  3. All the capital figures are vigorous and carved standing on a **square or circular abacus**.
  4. Abacuses are decorated with **stylised lotuses**.
  5. Some of the existing pillars with capital figures were found at **Basarah-Bakhira, Lauriya- Nandangarh, Rampurva, Sankisa and Sarnath**.

The Mauryan pillar capital found at Sarnath popularly known as the Lion Capital is the finest example of Mauryan sculptural tradition.

Ashokan edicts were inscribed on **stone pillars** that were made of **single columns of polished sandstone and had capitals on their top**. The best preserved of all Ashokan edicts stands at **Lauriya Nandangarh (Bihar)**. This thirty-two feet tall column has an almost fifty ton **seated lion capital** placed on its top, an engineering feat worth admiring.



## LION CAPITAL, SARNATH

The Lion Capital discovered more than a hundred years ago at Sarnath, near Varanasi, is generally referred to as Sarnath Lion Capital. This is one of the finest examples of sculpture from the Mauryan period. **Built in commemoration of the historical event of the**

first sermon or the **Dhammachakrapravartana** by the Buddha at Sarnath, the capital was built by Ashoka.

**The capital originally consisted of five component parts:**

1. these shaft (which is broken in many parts now)
2. a lotus bell base,
3. a drum on the bell base with four animals proceeding clockwise,
4. the figures of four majestic addorsed lions, and
5. the crowning element, *Dharamchakra*, a large wheel, was also a part of this pillar.

However, this wheel is lying in a broken condition and is displayed in the site museum at Sarnath.

**The capital without the crowning wheel and the lotus base has been adopted as the National Emblem of Independent India.**

Now kept in the archaeological museum at Sarnath, the capital has four lions firmly seated back to back on a circular abacus. The lion figures of the capital are very impressive and massive.

The monumentality of the image is easily noticeable. **The facial musculature of the lions is very strong.**

1. The **inversed lines of the lips and its subsequent effect of projection at the end of the lips** show the sculptor's observation for naturalistic depiction.
2. The lions appear as if **they have held their breath.**
3. The lines of the mane are **sharp** and follow the conventions that were in practice during that time. Their curly manes have **protruding volume.**
4. The weight of the body of each lion is firmly shown by the **stretched muscles of the feet.**
5. The surface of the sculpture is **heavily polished** which is typical of the Mauryan Period.



The **abacus has the depiction of a *chakra* (wheel) having twenty-four spokes** in all the four directions and a **bull, a horse, an elephant and a lion-BHEL-** between every *chakra* is finely carved.

1. The motif of the *chakra* becomes significant as a representation of the **Dhammachakra** in the entire Buddhist art.
2. Each animal figure, despite sticking to the surface, **is voluminous, its posture creating movement in the circular abacus.**
3. Despite having limited space between each *chakra*, these animal figures display considerable command over the depiction of movement in a limited space.

The circular abacus is supported by an inverted lotus capital.

1. Each petal of the lotus is sculpted keeping in mind its density.
2. The **lower portion has curved planes neatly carved.**
3. Being a pillar image, it was conceived to be viewed from all the side, thus there are **no boundations of fixed view points.**

A lion capital has also been found at Sanchi but is in a dilapidated condition. The motif of lion-capital-pillar continued even in the subsequent period.

## **Bull Capital , Rampurva**

The bull capital of Ashoka from Rampurva, Bihar, also belonging to the third century B.C. is an interesting study as

1. it is a mixture of **Persian and Indian elements.**
2. The lotus capital is entirely formalistic.
3. made up of **light coffee coloured sandstone.**
4. The motifs on the abacus are beautiful decorative elements like the **rosette, palmette and the acanthus ornaments,** none of them Indian.
5. However, the **crowning element of the bull capital,** that is the bull proper, is a master-piece of Indian craftsmanship, showing a





humped bull, well modelled, with its soft flesh beautifully represented, with its strong legs, sensitive nostrils and the ears cocked as if it were listening.

## **Sculptures**

Monumental images of *Yaksha*, *Yakshinis* and animals, pillar columns with capital figures, rock-cut caves belonging to the third century BCE have been found in different parts of India.

It shows the popularity of Yaksha worship and how it became part of figure representation in Buddhist and Jaina religious monuments.

1. Large statues of *Yakshas* and *Yakshinis* are found at many places like **Patna, Vidisha and Mathura**.
2. These monumental images are mostly in the **standing position**.
3. One of the distinguishing elements in all these images is their **polished surface**.
4. The depiction of faces is in full round with pronounced cheeks and **physiognomic** detail.
5. One of the finest examples is a *Yakshi* figure from Didarganj, Patna, which is tall and well-built. It shows sensitivity towards depicting the human physique. The image has a polished surface.

## **DIDARGUNJ YAKSHINI**

The most well known of these is the *Yakshi* from Didarganj. The beauty of these figures lies in the **exactness of their workmanship** and in the fact that they appear to be made from one single stone. Like the pillars, these figures are polished with a unique surface gloss (now called Mauryan polish). You will be amazed to know that **despite all these centuries this gloss has not lost its shine**. Besides the language that has been used in nearly all the inscriptions and Prakrit which appears to have become the lingua franca of the country and in the Brahmi script the earliest known Indian script.

The life-size standing image of a Yakshini holding a **chauri (flywhisk)** from Didargunj near modern Patna is another good example of the sculptural tradition of the Mauryan Period.

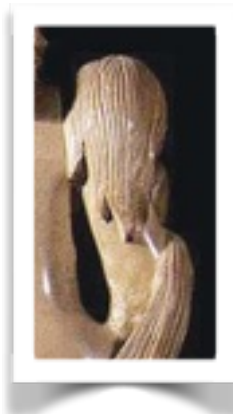
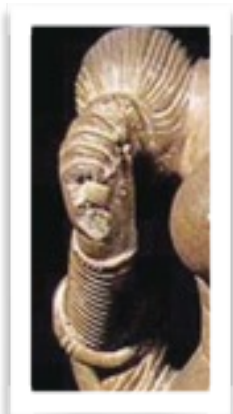
The figure wearing elaborate jewellery and a heavy undergarment, though massive and bold in its execution, portrays in a grand manner, the Indian ideal of feminine beauty in her full breasts, slender waist and broad hips.

### Kept in Patna Museum,

1. it is a **tall, well-proportioned, free-standing sculpture** in round made in **sandstone** with a polished surface.
2. They appear to be made **from one single stone**.
3. The *chauri* is held in the right hand whereas the left hand is broken.
4. The image shows sophistication in the treatment of form and medium.
5. The sculptor's sensitivity towards the **round muscular body** is clearly visible.
6. The face has round, fleshy cheeks, while the neck is relatively small in proportion; the eyes, nose and lips are sharp.
7. **Folds of muscles** are properly rendered.
8. The necklace beads are in full round, hanging to the belly.
9. The tightening of garment around the belly creates the effect of a **bulging belly**.
10. The lower garment has been rendered with great care. **Every fold of the garment on the legs is shown by protruding lines clinging to the legs, which also create a somewhat transparent effect.** The middle band of the garment falls till the feet.



11. Thick **bell-ornaments** adorn the feet.
12. The image stands firmly on its legs.
13. Heaviness in the torso is depicted by **heavy breasts**.
14. The back is equally impressive. The **hair is tied in a knot** at the back. The back is bare. Drapery at the back covers both legs.
15. The flywhisk in the right hand is shown with **incised lines continued on the back of the image**.



## **Yaksha, Parkham, Mathura**

1. A colossal standing figure of a man cut in the round, 7 feet in height from head to foot and 2 feet broad across the shoulders...
2. The statue is made of **grey sandstone**, and still retains many traces of having been highly polished...
3. Both arms being broken off just below the shoulder, it is difficult to say what was the action of the figure. But I suspect that the statue was that of a yaksha, or attendant demi-god, who carried a chauri over the right shoulder...As



the characters [of the inscription on the base] are those of the Asoka period, the statue must belong to the 3rd century B.C..."

Q. Terracotta figurines show a very different delineation of the body as compared to the sculptures. How?

Another noteworthy aspect of Mauryan architecture is the rock cut caves.

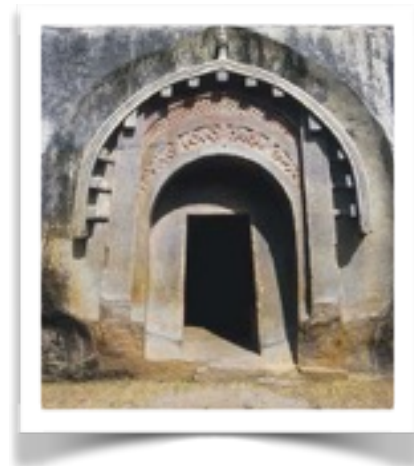
## **Rock Cut Cave- Lomush Rishi**

The **Lomash Rishi** (with its impressive entrance) and the **Sudama caves** at Gaya are examples of such architecture. **These caves cut from solid rock were provided by Ashoka for non-Buddhist monks.** These caves marked the beginning of the rock cut architecture which was patronised by later rulers too. His rock edicts were inscribed in the local language and the local script.



1. The rock-cut cave carved at Barabar hills near Gaya in Bihar is known as the **Lomus Rishi cave**.
2. An inscription proves that this was excavated for the **Ajivika sect** in the time of Ashoka himself. The cave carved out of the living rock, measures 55' x 22' x 20'.

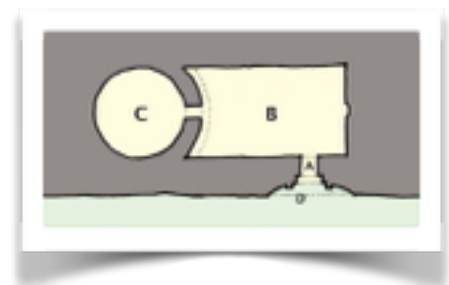
3. The facade of the cave is decorated with the **semicircular chaitya arch** as the entrance. The entrance is a representation in stone of a **hut entrance**, with the end of the roof constructed of bent timber supported by cross beams, the ends of which are shown protruding.



4. **A carved frieze of elephants** is a stone imitation of similar work in wood along with a stone imitation of trellis work made of small stick of bamboo. The **elephant frieze** carved in high relief on the *chaitya* arch **shows considerable movement**. This is an excellent example showing the development from earlier shapes in timber translated into stone. The period is the 3rd century B.C.

5. The interior hall of this cave is **rectangular** with a **circular chamber at the back**.

6. The entrance is located on the side wall of the hall.



7. The cave was patronised by Ashoka for



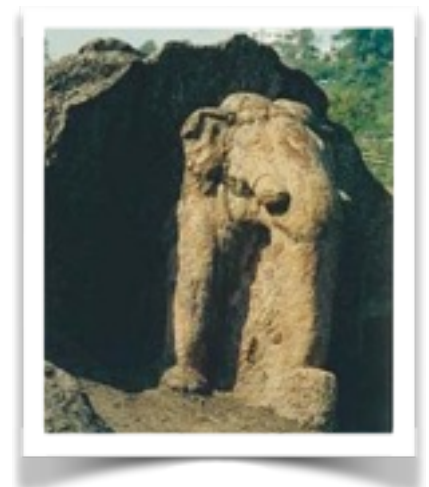
the Ajivika sect.

8. The Lomus Rishi cave is an isolated example of this period. But many Buddhist caves of the subsequent periods were excavated in eastern and western India.

Due to the popularity of Buddhism and Jainism, *stupas* and *viharas* were constructed on a large scale.

However, there are also examples of a few Brahmanical gods in the sculptural representations.

Depiction of a monumental **rock-cut elephant at Dhauli** in Orissa shows **modelling in round with linear rhythm**. It also has Ashokan rock-edict. All these examples are remarkable in their execution of figure representation.



## **Chaitya, karle**

1. Another excavated cave about a hundred years later is the **magnificent prayer hall or Chaitya, at Karle in the Poona district**.
2. This too has been excavated from the living rock and is unparalleled for its lofty and elevated impression.
3. The size is truly stupendous, 124'x46-1/2'x45'.

4. With well proportioned great and bulky pillars, carrying capitals of great originality holding up a vaulted roof that has real rafters of timber inserted into it, a ribbing inherited and copied from wooden structure.

5. The columns are strong and bulky, surmounted by sculptured capitals.

6. In the far distance there is a stupa with a wooden umbrella on top and astonishingly the **original wood has survived unharmed to this date.**



## Stupas

The Buddhist Stupa is another form of architecture, comprising a hemispherical dome, a solid structure into which one cannot enter.

The stupa is a **glorified, beautified, enlarged funerary mound**: what was once the resting place of the bones and ashes of a holy man. Tradition has it

that after the great demise of Lord Buddha, Emperor Ashoka decided to construct a large number of stupas throughout his dominion in memory of the Master and enshrine in them relics such as pieces of bones, teeth, hair etc., over which the Stupas were constructed.

Originally the stupa was made of bricks and surrounded by a wooden railing.

The existing stupa at Sanchi encloses the original stupa and has been enlarged and enclosed within the stone railing or balustrade, when stone was adopted in the place of wood.

To the stupa which consisted of a domical structure,

- **a base, sometimes circular, sometimes square**, was added in the 1st century B.C.,
- **a circumambulatory path** as well as the **stone railing with four elegantly carved gateways** in the four cardinal directions.

**the Harmika;**

- The harmika was a small platform with a railing located at the very top of a stupa. Sometimes umbrellas were mounted in the harmika as a symbol of honour and respect.
- a square Buddhist railing from which rises the shaft that holds the imperial umbrella, sometimes single and later on multiplied to three or even more, diminishing in size as they go upwards.



The railing and gateways at **Bharhut, Sanchi and Bodh Gaya** are the most famous in the north and at **Amravati and Nagarjunakonda** in the South.

Upright pillars and cross bars, based on wooden construction, were made and provided the occasion for some of the finest low relief carvings to be found anywhere in Indian art.

The Sanchi Stupa has a diameter of 120' and a height of 54'.

It is important to note that the *stupas* were constructed over the relics of the Buddha at **Rajagraha, Vaishali, Kapilavastu, Allakappa, Ramagrama, Vethadipa, Pava, Kushinagar and Pippalvina**.

The textual tradition also mentions construction of various other *stupas* on the relics of the Buddha at several places including Avanti and Gandhara which are outside the Gangetic valley.

*Stupa, vihara* and *chaitya* are part of Buddhist and Jaina monastic complexes but the largest number belongs to the Buddhist religion.

One of the best examples of the structure of a *stupa* in the third century BCE is at **Bairat in Rajasthan**. It is a very grand *stupa* having a circular mound with a circumambulatory path.

The great *stupa* at Sanchi (which will be discussed later) was built with bricks during the time of Ashoka and later it was covered with stone and many new additions were made.

Subsequently many such *stupas* were constructed which shows the popularity of Buddhism.

In the subsequent century, *stupas* were elaborately built with certain additions like the enclosing of the circumambulatory path with railings and sculptural decoration.

1. There were numerous *stupas* constructed earlier but expansions or new additions were made in the second century BCE.
2. The *stupa* consists of a cylindrical **drum** and a circular **anda** with a **harmika** and **chhatra** on the top which remain consistent throughout with minor variations and changes in shape and size.
3. Apart from the circumambulatory path, **gateways** were added.
4. Thus, with the elaborations in *stupa* architecture, there was ample space for the architects and sculptors to plan elaborations and to carve out images.

During the early phase of Buddhism, Buddha is depicted symbolically through footprints, *stupas*, lotus throne, *chakra*, etc.

1. This indicates either simple worship, or paying respect, or at times depicts historicisation of life events.

2. Gradually narrative became a part of the Buddhist tradition. Thus events from the life of the Buddha, the *Jataka* stories, were depicted on the railings and *torans* of the *stupas*.
3. Mainly **synoptic** narrative, **continuous** narrative and **episodic** narrative are used in the pictorial tradition.
4. While events from the life of the Buddha became an important theme in all the Buddhist monuments, the ***Jataka* stories** also became equally important for sculptural decorations.
5. The main events associated with the Buddha's life which were frequently depicted were events related to the birth, renunciation, enlightenment, *dhammachakra- pravartana*, and *mahaparinibbana* (death). Among the *Jataka* stories that are frequently depicted are *Chhadanta Jataka*, *Vidurpundita Jataka*, *Ruru Jataka*, *Sibi Jataka*, *Vessantara Jataka* and *Shama Jataka*.

## **Pottery**

1. Use of the **potters wheel became universal**.
2. The pottery associated with the Mauryan period consists of many types of ware. But the most highly developed technique is seen in a special type of pottery known as the **Northern Black Polished Ware (NBP)**, which was the hallmark of the preceding and early Mauryan periods.

3. The NBP ware is made of **finely levigated alluvial clay**, which when seen in section is usually of a grey and sometimes of a red hue.
4. It has a **brilliantly burnished dressing** of the quality of a glaze which ranges from a jet black to a deep grey or a metallic steel blue.
5. Occasionally **small red-brown patches** are apparent on the surface.
6. It can be distinguished from other polished or graphite-coated red wares by its **peculiar lustre and brilliance**.
7. This ware was used largely for dishes and small bowls. It is found in abundance in the Ganges valley.
8. Although NBP was not very rare, it was obviously a more expensive ware than the other varieties, since potsherds of NBP were occasionally found riveted with copper pins indicating that even a cracked vessel in NBP ware had its value.

## Coins

1. The coins issued by the Mauryans are **mostly silver** and a **few copper** pieces of metal in various shapes, sizes and weights and which have one or more symbols punched on them.
2. The most common symbols are the **elephant, the tree in railing symbol and the mountain**. These symbols are said to have either

represented the Royal insignia or the symbol of the local guild that struck the coin.

3. The technique of producing such coins was generally that the metal was cut first and then the device was punched.
4. Some coins had Shroff (money changer) marks on them indicating that older coins were often re-issued.

## **Donors and Patronage**

From the second century BCE onwards, we get many inscriptional evidences mentioning donors and, at times, their profession.

1. The pattern of patronage has been a very collective one and there are very few examples of royal patronage.
2. Patrons range from lay devotees to *gahapatis* and kings.
3. Donations by the guilds are also mentioned at several sites.
4. However, there are very few inscriptions mentioning the names of artisans such as Kanha at Pitalkhora and his disciple Balaka at Kondane caves.
5. Artisans' categories like stone carvers, goldsmiths, stone-polishers, carpenters, etc. are also mentioned in the inscriptions.
6. The method of working was collective in nature and at times only a specific portion of the monument is said to have been patronised by a particular patron.
7. Traders recorded their donation along with their place of origin.

