
A Newly Discovered Buddhist Cave in Wai Village of Satara District, Maharashtra

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Abstract: During my trek in the mountains of Wai, I lost direction and stumbled upon a scarp in the mountain where I discovered a cave. The cave is not seen from the foothills. Even near the scarp, one has to sneak between the boulders to enter this cave since the entrance is nearly covered with boulders. This cave is not known to the scholarly world and thus has not been documented by anyone so far. Renusevasti, a small settlement of 10 houses, lies adjacently to the foothills of this mountain. The entire architecture confirms this cave to be of early Theravada period. This newly discovered cave adds up to the number of Buddhist caves already seen in this region and helps in revising the chronology of the rock cut caves of Western Maharashtra.

Keywords: Theravada, Buddhism, Wai, Western Maharashtra, Vihara, Monk-cells, Kodhi

Introduction

In order to propagate the Dhamma, the great Mauryan Emperor Ashoka sent missionaries to various places in ancient India and abroad. In Maharashtra (ancient Maharattha) he sent the monk, Mahadhammarakkhita. The spread of Buddhism led to increase in the monks order in Maharashtra. As per the Vinaya (rule book for the monks), the monks are supposed to spend the monsoon retreat in an isolated place. Ashoka is credited for the first excavation of rock cut architecture in India. The caves were donated to the monks. This newfound medium in rocks then further grew to Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and in southern parts of the country; however due to high intensity basalt rock, this art flourished in Maharashtra. Among the 1200 caves excavated in India, Maharashtra has approximately 1000 caves. These caves can be categorized as 80 % Buddhist, 15 % Hindus (Brahmanical) and 5 % Jains (Bhosekar, 2019).

The architectural remains in Western India, so far as at present begin with the Buddhist period (Cusens, 1926). These caves were used by monks for their religious and meditation practices. A typical Buddhist cave comprises of a vihara, a chaityagraha that has a stupa, an undecorated cell, mandapa or hall and a cistern. The remarkable

skills displayed in fashioning this rock-cut architecture indicate that those ancient craftsmen were not beginners, and they had served a long period of apprenticeship in carving these structures. There are no signs of experimentation or trial cuttings. Since there was no precedent for such a method of production, the only alternative way was to repeat in rocks those structures of wood which had already been found serviceable in the past (Kail 1975). Hence, it is easy to follow and understand the stages of excavation since many of these structures are left unfinished.

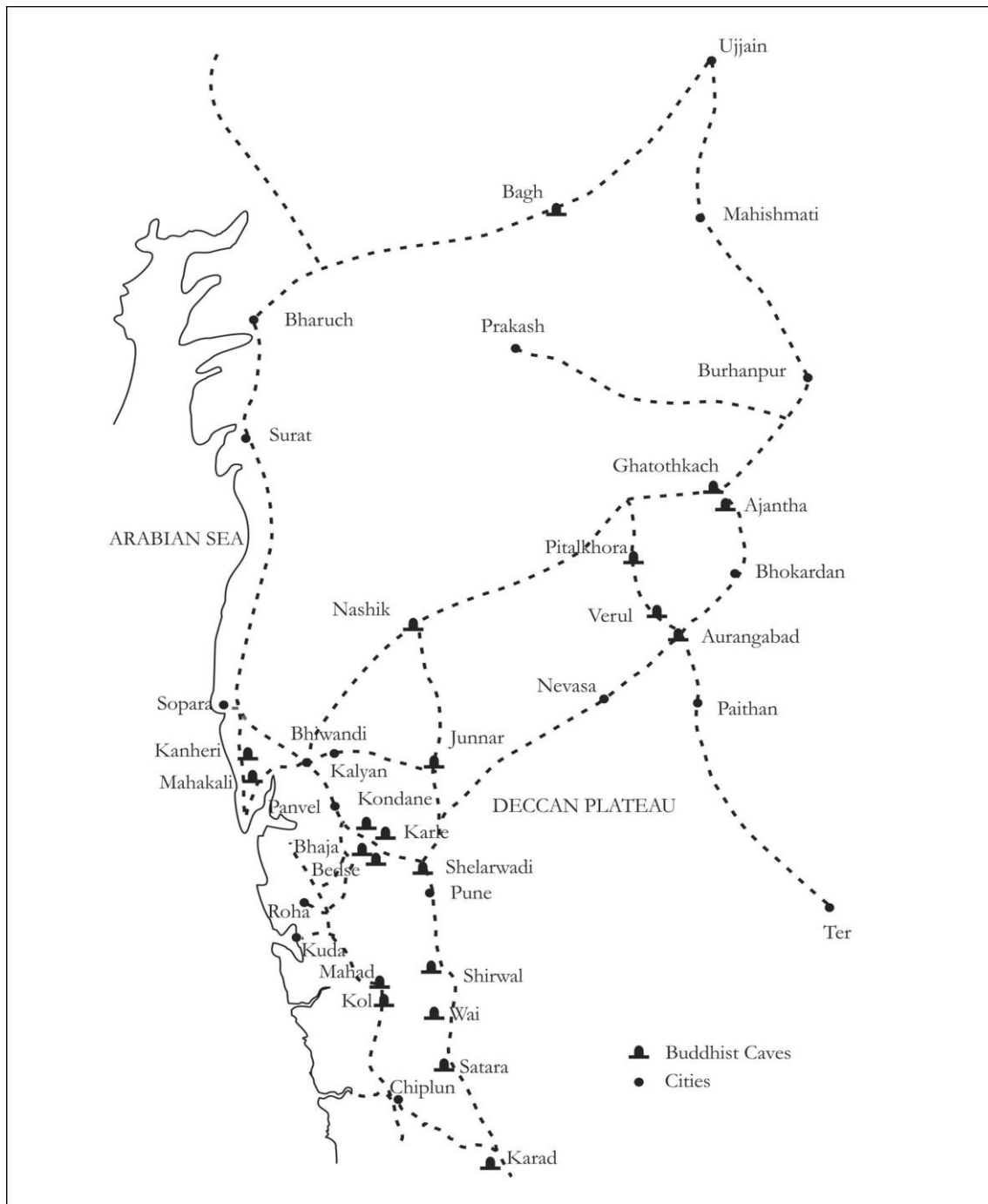


Figure 1: Ancient Trade Route and Buddhist Cave Sites

The Buddhist cave architecture cannot be really termed as 'architecture'; since they do not use constructional principles, nor do they display any functional properties; their columns support no loads, their arches support no weight nor counteract any thrust, for problems of this nature did not arise, as the parts were virtually one. Rock architecture, to all intents and purposes is not architecture – it is a sculpture, but sculpture on a grand and magnificent scale (Kail 1975).

The Sahyadris of western India is rich in rock-cut caves of various sizes and numbers from the second century BC to the ninth century AD. In Maharashtra, the caves at Bhaje were the first to be excavated in circa 200 BC. (Dhavalikar 2003). All of the Buddhist caves have been excavated by donations received from the lay people (devotees), kings, merchants, farmers, soldiers, tourists and even monks. It was an age of great faith and patronage, and these rock-cut sanctuaries represent one of the most important sources of our knowledge of early Indian art and history (Spink 1958). The earlier phase of the Buddhist rock-cut excavations represents the Theravada sect wherein the Buddha is not represented in the human form but is represented by various symbols such as the *Stupa*, Bodhi tree, an empty throne, footprints, the *Dharmachakra* (Wheel of Dhamma), lion, *triratna* (three jewels), etc (Dehejia 1979). This phase is usually seen from 200 BC to 400 AD. In the Mahayana sect, the Buddha is represented in the human form i.e. iconic along with the Bodhisattvas, Tara, attendants and in the later phase, elaborately carved stupas and animals. These caves were excavated between 400 – 700 AD.

Nearly all the Buddhist caves are excavated on or are seen near the ancient trade route (Figure 1). Kolhapur – Karad – Satara – Wai – Shirwal – Pune – Shelarwadi was an ancient trade route connecting further to Junnar and Nashik on one side and Bharuch on the other. The documented Lohare and the Pandavgad caves near Wai have a simple plan like chaityagruha, viharas, single monk cells and water tanks. Though none of the caves seen in Wai have any inscription, the architecture confirms these to be in the early Theravada period dated between 200 – 400 AD.

Geology

The Deccan traps cover almost the whole of the district and constitute the innumerable rugged and bold, flat-topped hills, forming extensive plateau of the entire Western Ghats. They also constitute the small hill ranges in the eastern and central parts of the district. The hills consist of several lava flows of different thickness. At places these successive lava beds have thin intercalations of a red ferruginous clay bed called "red bole." Vertical, prismatic and columnar joints are commonly observed in the hard and compact basalts. Laterite occurs extensively covering the north and central portions of the district. Most of the laterite beds in the district are categorized as ferruginous laterite or a very low-grade aluminous laterite. These are considered to have been formed by the chemical alteration of the underlying traps by concentration of iron, alumina and titanium oxides with the leaching out of silica and manganese. This can be seen in the Buddhist caves (now apportioned as a Mahadev temple) of

Lohare. Accumulation of massive, dislodged masses and blocks of laterite along the slopes and foot of the hills and ridges is a common feature here (Satara Gazetteer 1963).

Renusevasti Buddhist Caves at Wai

The author has discovered these caves ($17^{\circ} 59'25.26''\text{N}$ $73^{\circ} 52'5.25''\text{E}$) in the hill situated around 11 kms from Wai city and 12 kms from the documented Lohare caves (locally known as Palkeshvar) (Figure 2). The Pandavgad caves at the hills of Pandavgad have been mentioned in the Bombay Gazetteer (vol XIX). Wai taluka in Satara district is exclusively surrounded by the mountains which supports the geology of cave architecture. Many scholars have studied the Lohare and Bawdhan caves in details. Mr. Frere had documented the Lohare caves in 1848. (JBRRAS, 1848). The group of Buddhist rock-cut caves discussed here is not known to the scholarly world. However, the people staying in Renusevasti are aware of their existence and do not dare to go there since they fear the rocks falling from above the mountains.

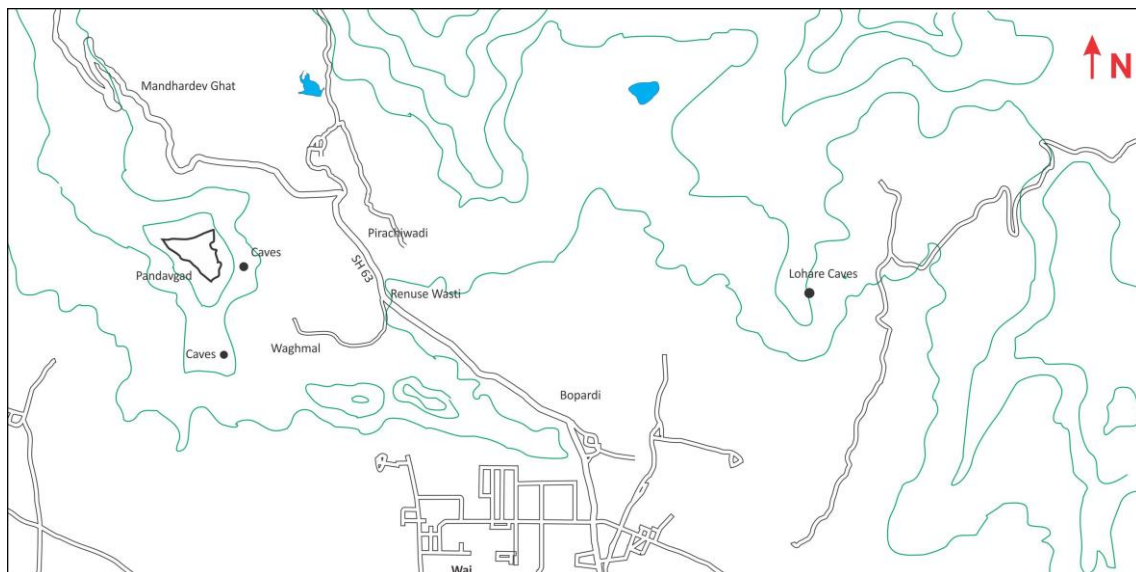


Figure 2: Location Map of the Caves

Since the caves in discussion are near to Renusevasti (Figure 3), the author has named them as *“Renusevasti Buddhist Caves”*. These caves are difficult to access since no foot trail exists. The author had to decide her path and reach the scarp through the forest area. The front portion of this rock has yellowish red sandstone, and the inner portion is composed of basalt rock. The front part of the rock has collapsed on the entrance, which makes the cave invisible. For the study I have named this as Cave 1. There are four other excavations seen on the facing left of the cave; however, these are buried with silts, mud and stones that could have been brought in by the rainwater from the mountain.

The entrance of cave 1 (Figure 4) is 306° North-west, facing 88° East. This is a vihara with 4 monk cells - one each on the left and right side of the cave and two on the facing wall (Figure 5). The monk cells are neatly cut and follow symmetry. There is an open

box like monk cell carved with rock- cut bench between the second and the third monk cells. Such type of monk cell is not seen in any of the western Maharashtra Buddhist caves and thus this format makes the cave unique.



Figure 3: General View of the Scarp from Renusevasti



Figure 4: The Entrance of Cave 1

Description

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is 4 feet from the floor level. This indicates that the cave could be flooded with water during the monsoon. The erosion of the walls and the benches as well as the floor is quite visible to the eyes. The entire cave was covered with fine smooth mud, pebbles and some large shaped rocks.

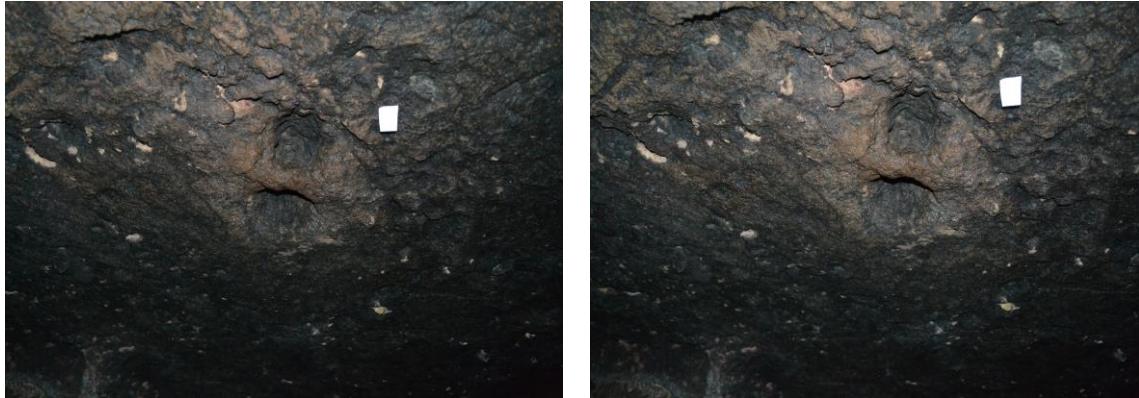


Figure 6: Sockets Carved out on the Roof



Figure 7: General View of Cells 2 and 3 and the Box-like Cell in Between



Figure 8: Sloping Platform in Between the Irregular Sized Hinges

Cell 1: The first monk cell on the left is carved 14 feet from the entrance. The cell is square with each side measuring 7 feet. There is a bench measuring 2 feet 4 inches in width spanning the entire length of the back wall. The door is about 3 feet 3 inches wide

and 6 feet 9 inches in height. The cell has two non-uniform door hinge socket holes at the bottom with a centrally slopping platform in between them. The left side socket hole is about 8 inches wide and 16 inches long, whereas the right-side socket hole is about 6 inches wide and 13 inches long. The slopping platform is 23 inches long and 11 inches wide (Figure 8). One can see a cut at the lintel. This cell has a crack running around the three walls. This layer of rock is made up of red sandstone. The cell floor was covered with stone and mud debris. After cleaning, the floor showed rough and irregular surface. The walls, stone bench and the floor show erosion due to water clogging.

Cell 2: This monk cell is excavated on the facing wall of the vihara. The cell is 6 feet 9 inches wide and 7 feet 5 inches deep. The rock bed bench is 2 feet 5 inches in width and spans the entire width of the cell. The door is 3 feet 7 inches wide and 7 feet 2 inches high. There are hinges socket holes at the bottom of the doorway with the left socket hole being 6 inches wide and 14 inches long and the right socket hole 6 inches wide and 10 inches long. The center slopping platform is 11 inches in width and 21 inches in length. This cell is eroded and covered with mud and debris on the floor. The huge crack of sandstone continues throughout the cell. The right side of the door wall is irregularly broken at the centre.

Cell 3: This monk cell is on the far right of the facing wall. The cell is a square with all sides measuring 7 feet. The bench is 2 feet 5 inches deep and 7 feet wide. The door is 3 feet 1-inch wide and 6 feet 9 inches high. The left side hinge socket hole at the doorway is 9 inches wide and 18 inches in length. The right side socket hole is 8 inches wide and 15 inches in length. The center slopping platform is 11 inches in width and 2 feet and 4 inches in length. Deteriorated rocks can be seen throughout the cell. There is a crack on the left side of the door.

Cell 4: This monk cell is exactly opposite to the cell 1. The cell is nearly square with sides measuring 6 feet 8 inches. The bench is 2 feet 5 inches in width spanning the entire length of the back wall. The door is 3 feet 6 inches in width and 6 feet 8 inches high. The left hinge socket hole is 8 inches wide, and 18 inches in length and the right hinge socket hole is 7 inches wide, and 13 inches in length. The center slopping platform is 1 foot in width and 2 feet 5 inches in length. There is a huge crack at the left corner of the wall. This cell is covered with rocks and mud. There is a hole on the left side of the wall above the bench through which rainwater would be seeping as seen from the marks.

Kodhi: Kodhis are featureless items that nothing particularly can be said about their typological variety. Some scholars have suggested that some of these are just view-seats meant for the monks to sit there and enjoy the beautiful vista of the natural surroundings (Nagaraju 1981). The Renusevasti Buddhist caves have such a kodhi at the entrance of Cave 1. On facing left, there is a triangular space measuring 3 feet high, 6 feet 5 inches deep, 7 feet 10 inches wide and 2 feet above ground level. All the sides are smooth. The deposition of silt and debris over the long period has increased the

ground level to this kodhi level. This place would have been a perfect setting for the monks to sit and enjoy nature or meditate overlooking the forest. Such type of cell is seen in cave complex of Shivneri, Ganesh lena, Manmodi, Mahad, Bhaja, Bedse and Kanheri.

The dating of caves is achieved using various methods: the content of inscriptions, the paleography of inscriptions, and the architectural style of the caves (Rees 2009). Though the inscriptions provide the most precise dating, in the absence of it, we need to rely on architectural evidence as seen in this cave.

Based on the diagnostic features of this cave and comparing it with the architectural set up seen in the nearby caves of Lohare, Pandavgad, Shirwal, Jakhinwadi, Mahad, Kol and Kuda, the Renusevasti group of Buddhist caves could be earliest excavated among the western rock-cut architecture due to its unique features which are not observed in later period cave architecture. The *kodhi* that is excavated at the entrance shows similarity with Bhaje and Bedse caves. Thus, the Renusevasti Buddhist caves would have been excavated between 100 – 200 AD.

Conclusion

The Sahyadris or the Western Ghats stretch parallel to the western coast traversing the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat. It is in the mountain ranges of this ghat that we see the Buddhist caves. The high intensity basalt rock favored this architecture. The locals do know of many such caves or architecture of the past and it should be noted that many caves in the past have been discovered by talking to them. A proper survey of the Western Ghats especially around the ancient trade route would bring to light many such unknown caves.

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