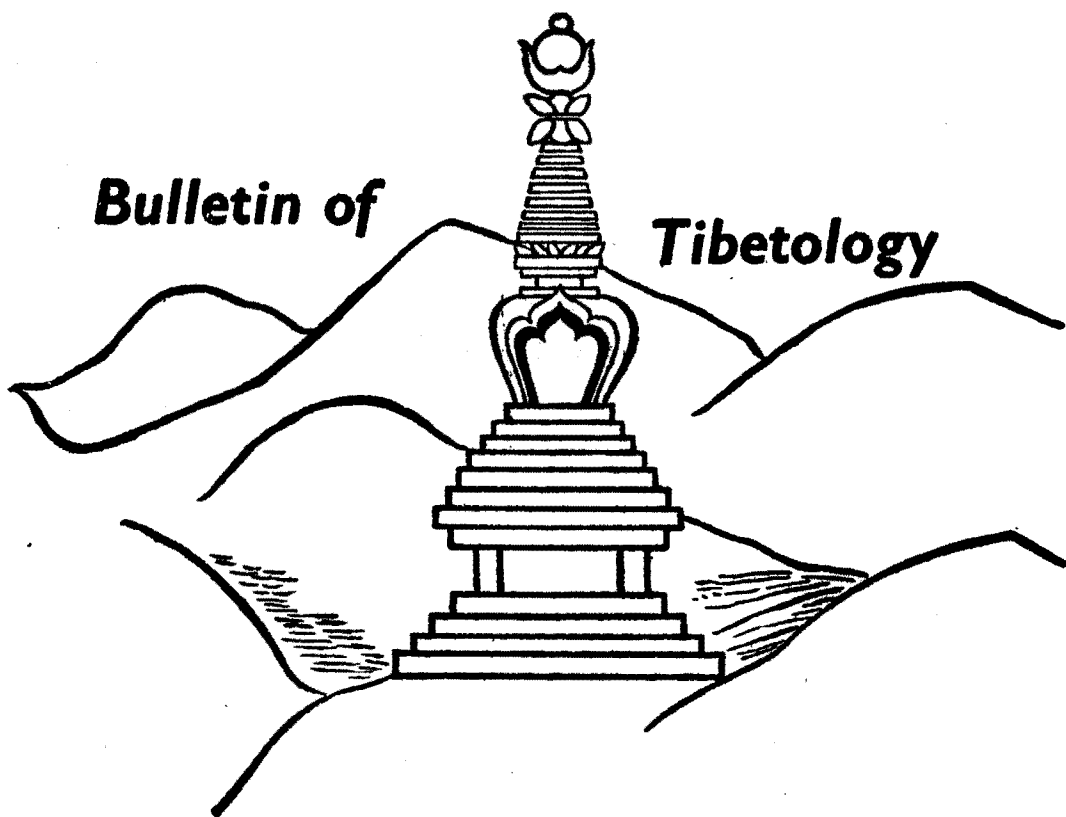


**Bulletin of**

**Tibetology**



VOL. X

NO. 3

NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOGY

SIR TASHI NAMGYAL  
Commemoration Lectures



# BULLETIN OF TIBETOLOGY

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SIR TASHI NAMGYAL  
MEMORIAL LECTURES

1973

BUDDHIST ART OF AJANTA AND TABO

By

M. N. DESHPANDE

Director General

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA

New Delhi



## PREFACE

When I received an invitation from the Director, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, to deliver Sir Tashi Memorial Lectures at Gangtok (Sikkim), I decided to talk about the paintings in the Tabo monastery situated in the Himalayan region of Himachal Pradesh. To give it a broader perspective, I thought I should also describe the art of Ajanta which led to the development of the art of painting in different parts within and outside the country. The lectures were delivered on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd of November, 1973. I hope the lectures will be found useful by scholars and lay-men for the proper understanding of Buddhist art.

Mr. Denjong Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal, Chogyal of Sikkim, was gracious enough to be present at all the three lectures. He also extended all facilities during my stay at Gangtok and I had the pleasure of discussing with him some of the problems of Buddhist art. I am indebted to him for arranging the lectures and to the Director of the Namgyal Institute for their prompt publication.

The photographs and drawings accompanying the text have been supplied by the Archaeological Survey of India. I am grateful to my colleagues in the Photo and Drawing Sections for preparing them with great care and to Shri B.M. Pande for his help in making the text press-ready.

M. N. DESHPANDE





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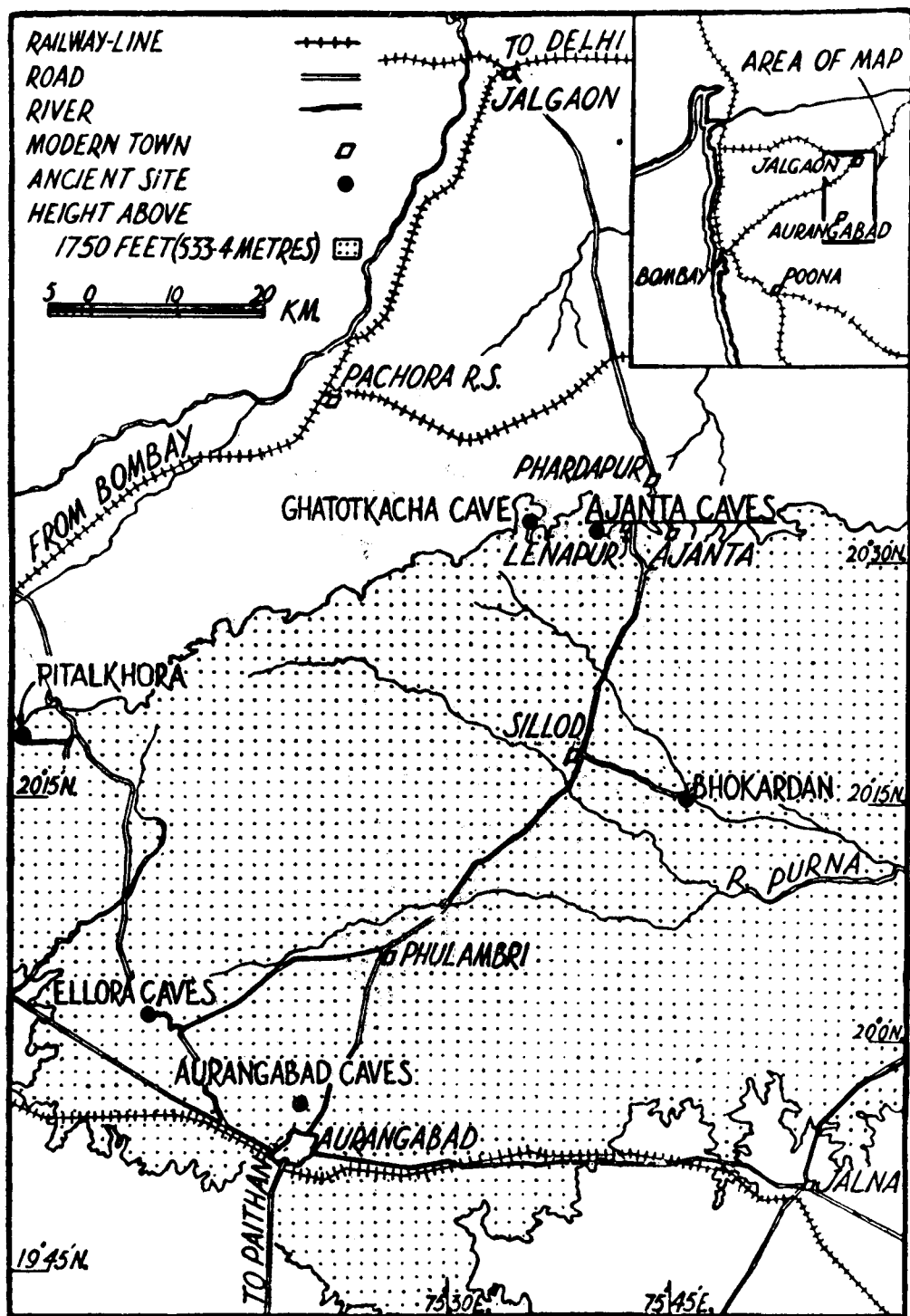


FIG. 1. Map showing Ajanta and its neighbourhood

## I. The Art of Ajanta : Sculpture

I am beholden to Denjong Chogyal and Dr. A. M. D'Rozario, respectively President and the Director of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, for having invited me to deliver Sir Tashi Namgyal Memorial Lectures at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. The late Denjong Chogyal Chempo Tashi Namgyal was known as a distinguished personality in many fields of human activity. He will be long remembered on account of his intellectual and scholarly pursuits. I, therefore, feel honoured for being called upon to deliver these three lectures instituted in his memory. I do not profess to be a scholar in Buddhism but have studied, during the course of my long service in the Archaeological Survey of India, the Buddhist Art of India, including that of the remarkable centre of Indian art namely Ajanta, which is well-known for its mural paintings. During the course of my work in north India I was fortunate to visit the monasteries in the Lahul and Spiti District of Himachal Pradesh and to study the paintings at Tabo. I thought that it would be appropriate to talk on Ajanta (fig. 1) and Tabo during the course of my lectures. The first two lectures would be devoted to Ajanta while the third will deal with Tabo which can be aptly described as the 'Himalayan Ajanta'. I shall try to bring home to the learned audience the importance of these monuments in the history of world art.\*

India has a great art tradition traceable through the centuries in her literature and archaeological remains. Of the latter, Ajanta occupies a place unique in the history of world art as the foremost art-centre of ancient India. Though well-known as a rich repository of mural paintings, it has architectural splendour and sculptural beauty rarely matched by any other centre of art in the country.

The art of Ajanta owes its inspiration to those early Buddhist *bhikshus* who came to western India in the wake of the spread of Buddhism under the patronage of Aśoka (273-36 B.C.). Among many cultural emissaries who went to different parts of India and Ceylon to preach *Dhamma*, the name of (Yavana) Dharmarakshita stands out for he appears to be responsible also for starting a new architectural activity in the Deccan, connected with the propagation of *Dhamma*. It is believed that he commenced his work from Śūrpāraka (modern Sopara, District Thana), a flourishing port-town and a find-spot of the edicts of Aśoka. The perpendicular cliffs of the amagdaloidal trap formation of the Sahyādri with horizontal beddings must have caught the imagination of the Buddhist monks as being ideal for the excavation of monasteries and

\* The photographs illustrating the talk have been reproduced here by the courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India.

prayer halls. It is very likely that the inspiration for such experiment might have evidently come from the early Aśokan caves attempted in the quartzose gneissic rock of the Barabar and Nagarjuni hills in District Gaya, South Bihar. These early caves, excavated by Aśoka and his grandson Daśaratha, appear to have set the new style for carving out, in the more permanent medium of rock, monastic centres meant for quiet contemplation and religious study by the monks. Such caves are undoubtedly in the tradition of the ancient Indian custom vouched in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* which describes a place a monk should use for quiet meditation. It says 'śabda-jal-āśray-ādibhiḥ mano' nu-kūle na tu chakshu-pīḍane guhā-nivātāśrayaṇe prayojayet.' The serene grandeur of a mountain abode always attracted the recluses and the *bhikṣus* found the hillside of the Sahyādri suitable for the establishment of *saṅgharāmas* (*vihāra*) and *chaitya-grīhas*. It appears from the available evidence that structures in the rock-cut form were brought into existence in western India some decades after the arrival of (Yavana) Dharmarakṣita. Examples conforming to Hīnayāna have been located at Bhaja (District Poona), Kondane (District Colaba), Pitalkhora and Ajanta (District Aurangabad) and many other places.

These early excavations were patronized by merchant-princes who lived and prospered under the benign rule of the Sātavāhana kings with their capital at Pratiṣṭhāna (identified with Paithan in District Aurangabad). Although these rulers professed Brahmanism, they were also tolerant towards Buddhism. The country was rich, prosperous and peaceful under their rule. Trade and commerce within the country and with the Mediterranean world brought in enormous riches. The early stage of rock-cut activity belonged to the Hīnayāna faith as the other school—Mahāyāna—was non-existent at that time. The excavations of this period can be placed in two centuries before and after the Christian era.

In this context it will be worthwhile examining the location of different Buddhist rock-cut caves in the Deccan. This study at once reveals that most of these Buddhist establishments were situated on the ancient *Sārthavāhapathas* or caravan-routes. Ajanta was no exception. The situation of Ajanta is significant in more than one ways. It is about 130 kilometres north of Paithan (ancient Pratiṣṭhāna), the capital of the early Sātavāhanas and lies on the ancient arterial trade-routes connecting north India, through Ujjain and Māhishmatī, with Pratiṣṭhāna in Dakṣiṇāpatha and further with ports on the south-eastern coast, through Ter (ancient Tagara), Kondapur, Amaravati (ancient Dhānyakataka), Guntapalli, etc. Half-way between Ajanta and Pratiṣṭhāna is a place called Bhokardan which can be identified with Bhogavardhana of the early Sanchi inscriptions. The last-mentioned place, which has recently been excavated by the Universities of Nagpur and Aurangabad, has yielded remains of the Sātavāhana period including a very fine ivory figurine showing affinity with the ivory figure of Lakṣmī of Indian origin found

at Pompeii in Italy. Ajanta also lies near another trade-route connecting Broach (ancient Bharukachchna, Barygaza of the *Periplus* and Po-lu-kachep'o of Hiuen Tsang) with Pratishthāna through ancient townships like Frakash and Bahal recently brought to light by excavation. As already mentioned, the selection of the site was conditioned by the chief consideration of quietude and scenic beauty. At Ajanta, the serene grandeur of nature is at once in evidence and the words of the Upanishadic seer (see above, p. 2) that an ideal place for the contemplation of the Divine is a hidden cave protected from wind, situated in surroundings made favourable to the mind by the sound of water and other features and not offensive to the eye, are amply borne out by the selection of the site. The stream Waghora, rushing down from the high grounds, takes seven leaps at the head of the semi-circular end of the gorge: the resultant waterfalls, pools of water (Sāt-kund) as also the melody of running water add charm to the place. In an inscription in Cave 16, the valley is described as resonant with chirping of birds and chattering of monkeys and the monastery as inhabited by great *yogins*.

It is not known what was the ancient name of Ajanta. However, about less than half a kilometre from the cave group is a place called Lenapur (cave town). It is not unlikely that this small hamlet came into existence about the time the first group of workers came and settled down at Lenapur for the purpose of excavating a monolithic cave-establishment. The name Ajanta, however, can perhaps be the ancient Ajitañjaya, a place mentioned in the *Mahāmāyūrī*, with the *yaksha* Kūṭaḍamshṭra ('one with peak-like teeth') as its patron deity. The caves have obtained their present name of Ajanta from a neighbouring village, the usual local pronunciation of which is Ajinṭhā. It would thus be seen that the words Ajitañjaya and Ajanta seem to be very closely related. It is also likely that the full ancient name of this monastic establishment was Ajitañjaya-sthāna from which the word Ajinṭhā could be an easy derivative. Ajita is also the lay-name of Maitreya or the Future Buddha.

The caves, now famous throughout the world, were once lost into oblivion and were re-discovered in the first quarter of the last century. A recently discovered inscription engraved in the plaster over a pillar in Cave 10 gives the name of a British officer with the date 1819. It appears that this first recorded visit took place immediately after the caves were noticed by the officers of the Madras Army in 1819.

The caves, however, find mention in the travel accounts of Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim who stayed in India for about fifteen years in the first half of the seventh century. It appears that he did not visit the caves and his description is mainly based on hearsay. He says 'In the east of this country (Mo-ha-la-ch'a = Mahārāshṭra) was a mountain range, ridges one above another in succession, tiers of peaks and sheer summits. Here was a monastery the base of which was in a dark defile, and its lofty halls . . . and storeyed terraces had the cliff on their back and

faced the ravine. This monastery had been built by A-chê-lo of West India ... Within the establishment was a large temple above 100 feet high in which was a stone image of the Buddha above seventy feet high : the image was surrounded by a tier of seven canopies unattached and unsupported, each canopy separated from the one above it by the space of three feet. The walls of this temple had depicted on them the incidents of Buddha's career as Bodhisattva, including the circumstances of his attaining bodhi and the omens attending his final passing away, all great and small were here delineated. Outside the gate of the monastery, on either side north and south was a stone elephant.'

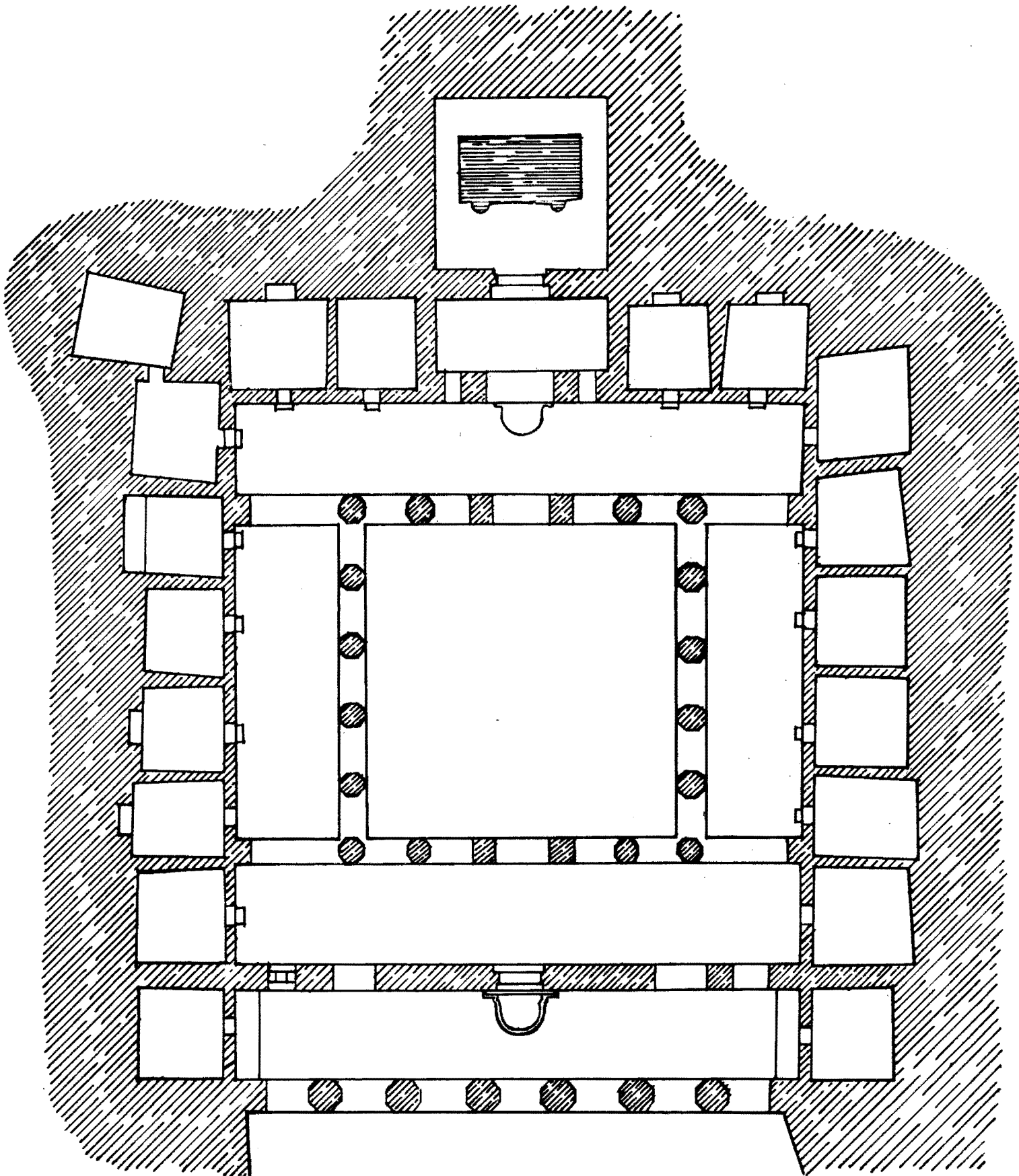
At the outset it must be made clear that the thirty caves at Ajanta were excavated over a long period when the country was being ruled by the Sātavāhanas and the Vākātakas. The Vākātakas hailed from Basim (ancient Vatsagulma, District Akola), about 130 kilometres north-east of Ajanta. The later caves, containing inscriptions, testify that a minister and a subordinate vassal of Vākātaka king, Harishena, were responsible for the excavation of Caves 16 and 17. The Vākātakas, besides being contemporary of the Imperial Guptas of north India, were matrimonially connected with them and thus this royal house came to represent the classical artistic tradition in the Deccan. In fact, Ajanta caves symbolize the high water-mark of ancient Indian tradition and the paintings assume great interest as giving a vivid picture of the social life and customs of ancient India.

As already stated, the earliest caves at Ajanta belong to the Hīnayāna tradition. An inscription on the façade of the oldest *chaitya-griha*, Cave 10, mentions that the *ghara-mukha* (façade) was the gift of one Vasithiputa Kaṭahādi, and that *vihāra*, Cave 12 was the gift of a merchant Ghanamadada. Recently two new inscriptions have come to light (A. Ghosh, *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XXXVI, Part VI, pp. 241—244) in Cave 10 and these belong to the second century B.C. One mentions a donation of a *bhīti* (wall) by Kanhaka of Bahada while the other mentions the gift of *pāsāda* by Dhamadeva.

The work at Ajanta began in the middle of the second century B.C. when Caves 10 and 12 were excavated. Almost about a century later was excavated Cave 9 which is a *chaitya-griha* with a closed façade. To the same period belong the Caves 8, 13 and 15A. However, the second phase of activity at Ajanta is of great importance. Almost after an interval of about 600 years, very ambitious excavations were planned at Ajanta to encompass the entire crescentic valley in order to meet the changing and growing needs of the faith, namely the broad-based Mahāyāna Buddhism. Accordingly, two magnificent *chaitya-grihas*, Caves 19 and 26 (the third one, Cave 29, was left unfinished) and commodious *vihāras*, Caves 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 11, 15, 16, 17 and 20-24, each of the latter type, almost invariably with a shrine of Buddha and some with sub-shrines for minor deities e.g. *yakshas* and niches for Buddha and

# AJANTA

PLAN OF VĀKĀTAKA PERIOD VIHĀRA (CAVE NO. 17)



# AJANTA

## PLAN OF CHAITYA CAVE NO. 10

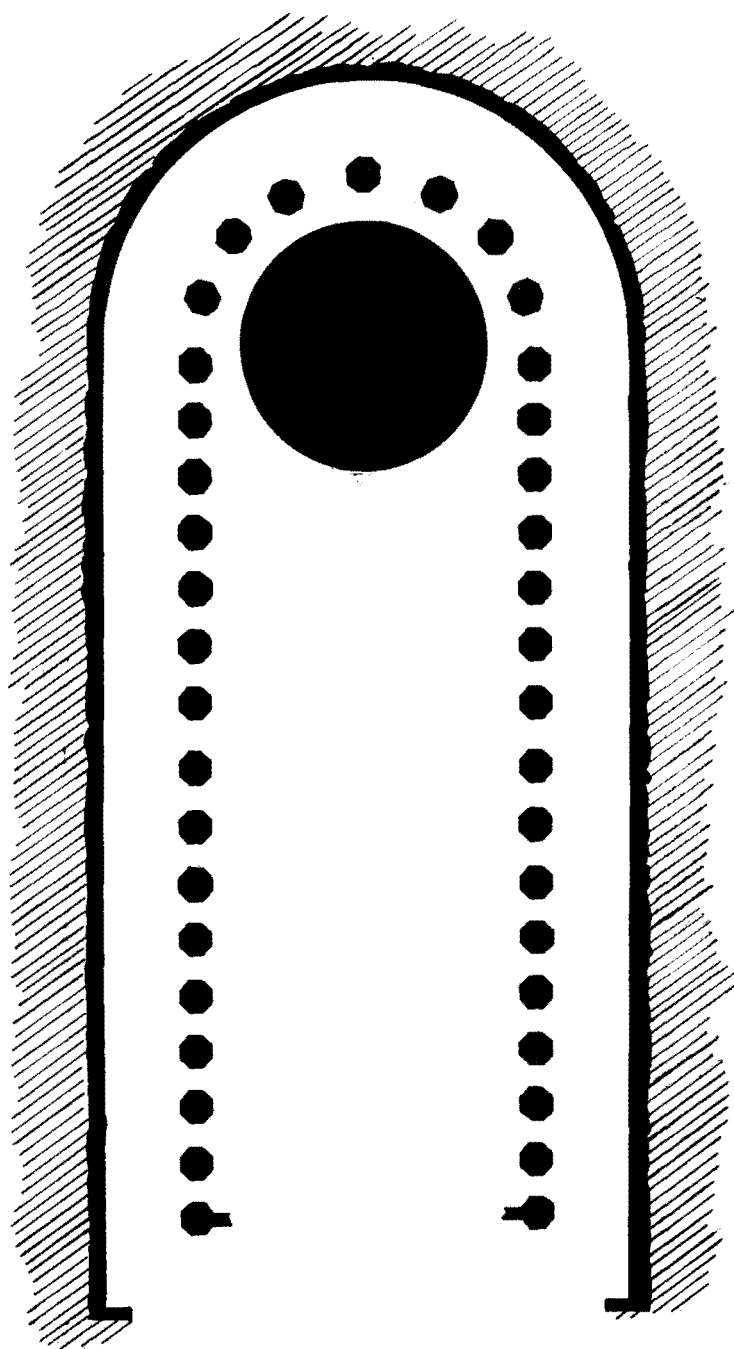
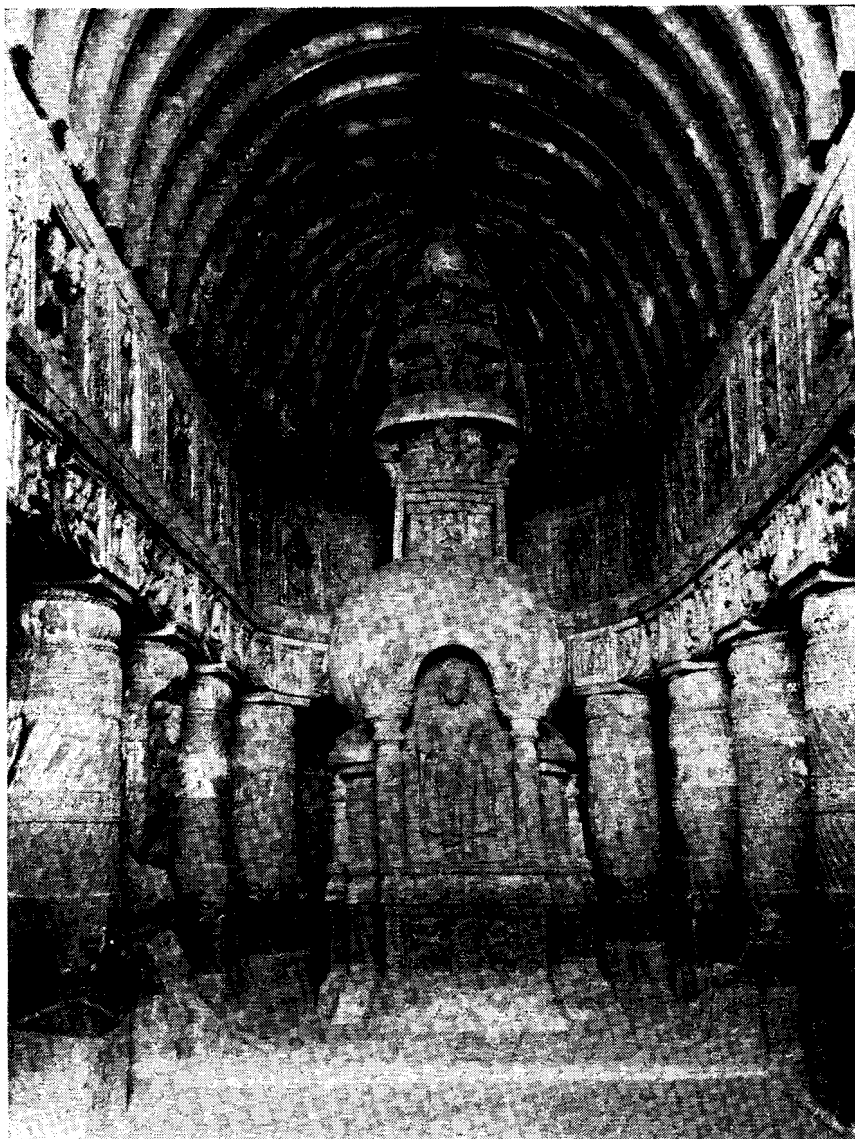


Fig. 2





*Plate I. Ajanta, Cave 9: interior of the chaitya-griha*

Bodhisattvas, were excavated. Almost all the excavations were completed in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. under the patronage of the Vākāṭaka rulers. An interesting inscription in Cave 16 in Ajanta mentions the dedication of a dwelling which was fully adorned with windows, doors, beautiful picture gallery and stairs and had a temple of Buddha inside, by one Varāhadeva, the minister of the last of the Vākāṭaka rulers,

Harishena, of about A.D. 475-500. Another inscription, in Cave 17, tells us of a chief of a family subordinate to Harishena. It describes how under his patronage was excavated a gem-like monolithic *mandapa*, Cave 17 itself, with a shrine for Buddha and an adjacent water-reservoir and a *gandha-kuṭi* ('perfumed-chamber'), which evidently is the *chaitya* Cave 19.

Rock-cut activity at Ajanta commenced, as already stated, from the middle of the second century B.C. and continued till almost the end of the sixth century A.D. During this long period, the artistic and architectural activity underwent development and the caves excavated in different periods beautifully illustrate such a development. Before we examine this process, it will be appropriate to understand the significant features of the two principal types of caves, namely the *chaitya-grihas* and the *vihāras*. A *chaitya-griha*, sometimes called simply a *chaitya*, was a prayer hall, apsidal or rectangular on plan, with a nave and side aisles marked out from each other by a row of pillars and a *stūpa* (often called *chaitya*) at the remote end of the nave (fig. 2 and plate I). A *saṅghārāma*, often called *vihāra*, is a monastic abode and had as its nucleus a central hall with flanking residential cells (fig. 3). At Ajanta, the progressive architectural development in the *chaitya-grihas* excavated during the Sātavāhana rule under the Hīnayāna influence and those excavated under Vākāṭaka patronage with Mahāyāna influence can be clearly detected. The early *chaitya-grihas* closely imitate contemporary buildings built in timber, the vaulted ceiling thereof still retaining the original attached wooden ribs. The later *chaitya-grihas* excavated under the Vākāṭakas, although following in a general way the plan of the typical *chaitya-griha*, were more elaborate in structural and sculptural treatment. Caves 19 and 26 exemplify the later efforts. Both these cave temples have received the highest attention by the addition of elegant pillared porticoes, charming façade and skilful integration of architectural and sculptural details. These two *chaitya-grihas* have forecourts with attached pillared rooms to provide for the accommodation of priest monks.

The later *vihāras* of Ajanta, of which Cave 1 or 17 may be taken to be the most representative examples, presuppose a long development from the pillarless and rather austere examples of the earlier period. The *vihāras* of the later period had a pillared porch or a verandah supported by elegantly decorated pillars, the sculptured capitals of which carry spectacular entablatures with friezes or panels of sculptures including scenes from the life of Buddha (plate II). The interior hall was supported by pillars arranged in a square and cells for monks pierced into the walls. An antechamber leads the visitor to the sanctum enshrining a colossal image of Buddha through well relieved door-frames.

In the fifth century and perhaps a few decades later, activity at Ajanta was so brisk that the work progressed simultaneously in different sectors. The *vihāras*, Caves 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7, together with smaller intervening



*Plate II. Ajanta, Cave 1: panel showing the four events which led the Buddha to renounce the world*

caves, were excavated at the outer end of the valley and Caves 11, 16, 17 and 20 in the central sector. The other *vihāras*, Caves 21 to 24, together with the *chaitya-griha*, Cave 26, at the inner end, were commenced a little later but were executed during the early part of sixth century and some were left unfinished.

### *The Sculpture of Ajanta*

The splendour of the paintings of Ajanta has overshadowed the elegance and serene dignity of its sculpture, as a result of which the latter has not received its due attention. The study of Ajanta sculpture is of utmost importance for the understanding of plastic art in the Deccan.

The sculptural activity in Buddhist caves in the Deccan is broadly divisible into two main periods. Ajanta does not, however, contain any

sculpture of the earlier period, covering about four centuries, from the second century B.C. to the second century A.D., when the caves associated with Hīnayāna at Ajanta, the *chaitya-grihas*, Caves 10 and 9, and *vihāras*, Caves 8, 12, 13 and 15A, were excavated. The lacuna is now filled by the fortunate discovery of a large number of early sculptures in the cave-group of Pitalkhora in District Aurangabad, about 70 km. to the west-south-west of Ajanta. Sculptures in the caves at Bhaja, Kondane, Nasik, Bedsa, Karla and Kanheri further help in showing an almost unbroken tradition of sculptural art of the earlier period. Thereafter, there was a comparatively unproductive period in the northern Deccan, the centre having shifted to Āndhradeśa, where, under the patronage of the later Sātavāhana and Ikshvāku rulers, the existing art-tradition blossomed forth as exemplified in the Buddhist monuments at Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. The discovery of sculptured limestone slabs of the Amaravati type at Ter (ancient Tagara) in the Deccan attests to the synthesis of these art-traditions. The northern Deccan came into prominence once more with the rise of the Vākātaka power, when an all-round development of fine arts like sculpture, painting and architecture was witnessed. Under the new impact of iconic Buddhism, figures of Buddha and the Bodhisattvas came to be carved as the chief objects of worship in the caves. Vākātaka inscriptions in the Ajanta and Ghatotkacha caves would indicate that this second phase was ushered in the last quarter of the fifth century A.D. Once a beginning had been made, side by side with the excavation of new caves, the existing Hīnayāna ones were suitably modified and sculptures or paintings of Buddha and the Bodhisattvas added thereto as at Pitalkhora, Karla, Nasik and Kanheri, while entirely new groups of caves were excavated at places like Aurangabad, Ellora and Ajanta itself.

Ajanta imbibed artistic influences which penetrated into the Deccan from both the north and the south. The figure-sculpture of Ajanta thus reflects the best in the art-tradition of contemporary India, generally drawing its inspiration from the artistic movement set afoot under the aegis of the Guptas and the Vākātakas yet retaining fundamentally autochthonous elements. The basic character of Ajanta sculpture is unconsciously but quite naturally related to the indigenous school of the Deccan sculpture which flourished under the Sātavāhanas and was later nurtured in the Krishna and the Godavari valleys. Indirect influences also travelled from north India. A recently-noticed inscription on the pedestal of a Buddha-image in the sanctum of Cave 4 of Ajanta states that the image was the *deya-dharma* or religious gift of a person named Māthura who was the son of Abhayanandin and the owner of the monastery (*vihāra-svāmī*). The name of the person may suggest that he hailed from Mathura, an important centre of Buddhism and Buddhist art in northern India. The influence of Sarnath is apparent on the sculptured decoration introduced during the fifth and the sixth centuries at several centres in



*Plate III. Ajanta Cave 1: Buddha in dharama-  
chakra-pravartana-mudra*

the Deccan. The later carvings, specially in the *chaitya* Cave 3 at Kanheri, show nearly the same refinement of modelling and spiritual expression as are met with at Sarnath. These features, which form the fundamental characteristics of Gupta art, are palpable at Ajanta in the standing figures of Buddha on the façades of Caves 9, 19 and 26 and particularly

in the standing figure of Buddha in *abhaya-mudrā* in Cave 19. Barring such exceptions, the general character of the sculpture has a certain amount of ponderosity and heaviness of form, despite a conscious attempt at imparting a spiritual expression and finer sensitivity to the sculpture by refined modelling.

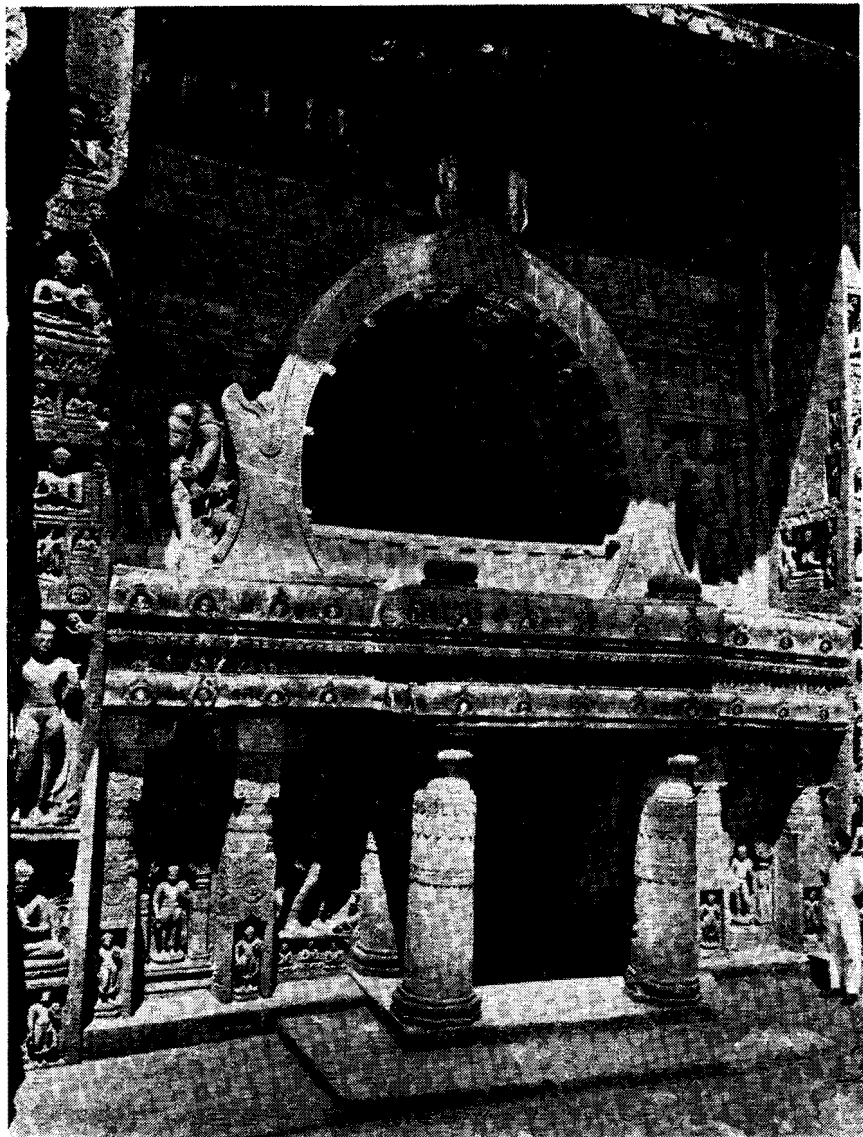
In the present context, I have selected a few important subjects to illustrate the rich variety of Ajanta sculpture. The most important subject is naturally the Buddha. The worship of Buddha as the saviour of humanity had taken roots in the Deccan by at least the fifth century A.D. and the artist took particular delight and care in fashioning his figure in rock. The presentation of Buddha in both *chaitya-grihas* and *vihāras* had become a necessity. The colossal images of Buddha carved in the *garbha-grihas*, located at the rear end of the pillared *vihāras*, thus form a class by themselves. In this class, Buddha is usually shown seated in *vajrāsana*. Flanked by a Bodhisattva acting as the whisk-bearer, the figures of Buddha have a sublime spiritual expression and appear to be the embodiment of *karuṇā* or benevolence in most cases. Among such figures, special attention may be drawn to the sculpture in Cave 1 (plate III). In another case, however, probably to match the greatness of Buddha, a sculpture of colossal proportions was carved in Cave 26, where the *parinirvāṇa* (extinction) of the Master is treated with an utmost warmth of feeling (plate IV).

The figures of Buddha flanking the entrance to the *chaitya*, Cave 19, are remarkable examples where the sculptor has lavished all his skill in bestowing on the Master a superb expression of detachment as also of universal love. He has refrained from producing colossal but has, for once, produced masterpieces. The fine modelling and the delineation of feeling by subtle touches have given a rare charm to these sculptures.

The highly-ornate façade of the *chaitya-griha*, Cave 19 (plate V), has a wealth of reliefs affording an opportunity for the study of sculpture of the classical period. Some plastic decoration cropped up here and there later on, but it only helps in understanding the artistic decadence and the changing pattern and needs of the faith. The façade was artisti-

Plate IV. Ajanta, Cave 26: *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of Buddha



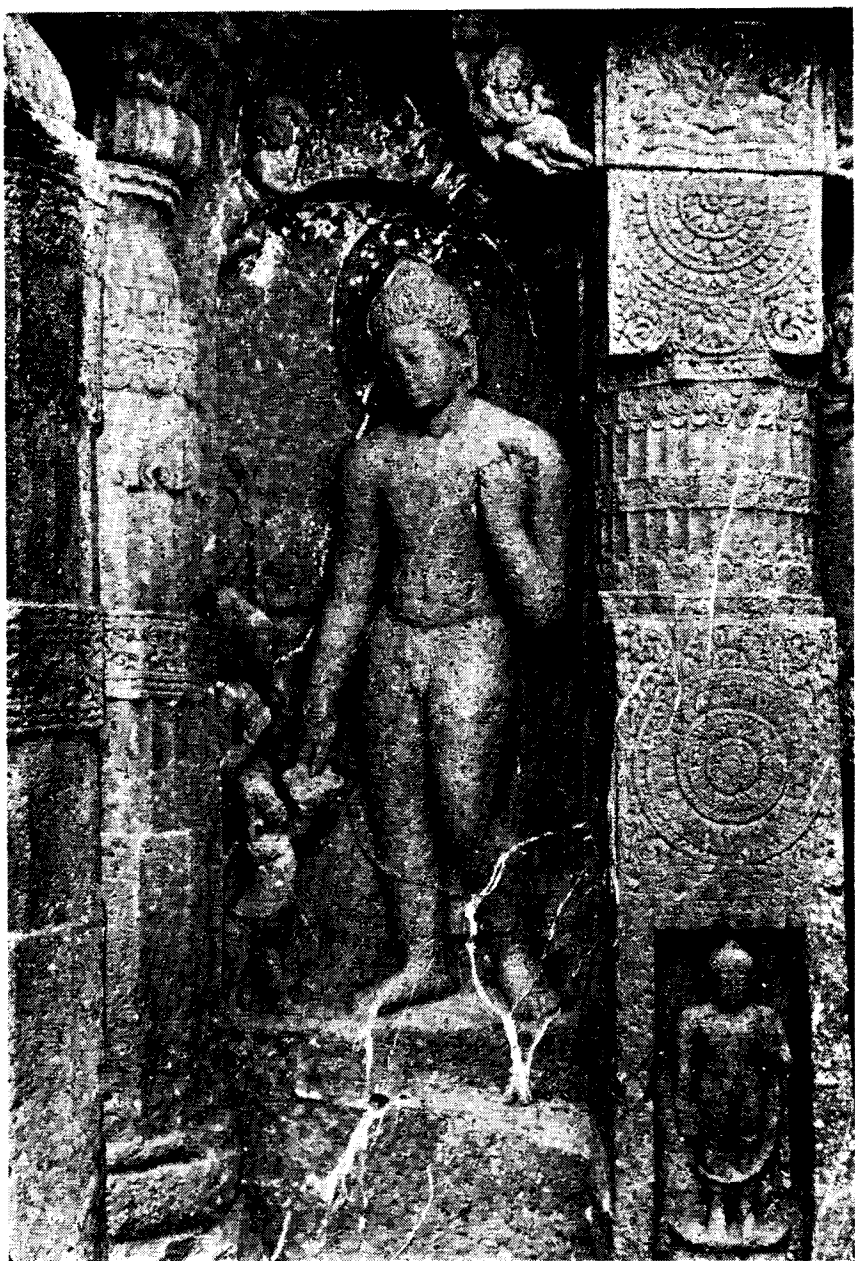


*Plate V. Ajanta, Cave 19: façade of the chaitya-griha*

cally conceived with a view to achieving an aesthetic unity by the harmonious blending of architecture and sculpture. The carvings on pillars and pilasters, the rows of chaitya-arches framing pretty faces, scrolls of foliage in horizontal bands—all these were introduced on the façade to project pleasing architectural features and to bring out the beauty of sculpture thoughtfully introduced at appropriate places.



Coming to the principal carvings on the façade, we notice two sculptured panels set within an architectural framework of delicately-carved



*Plate VI. Ajanta, Cave 19: Budāha handing over the  
begging bowl to Rāhula*

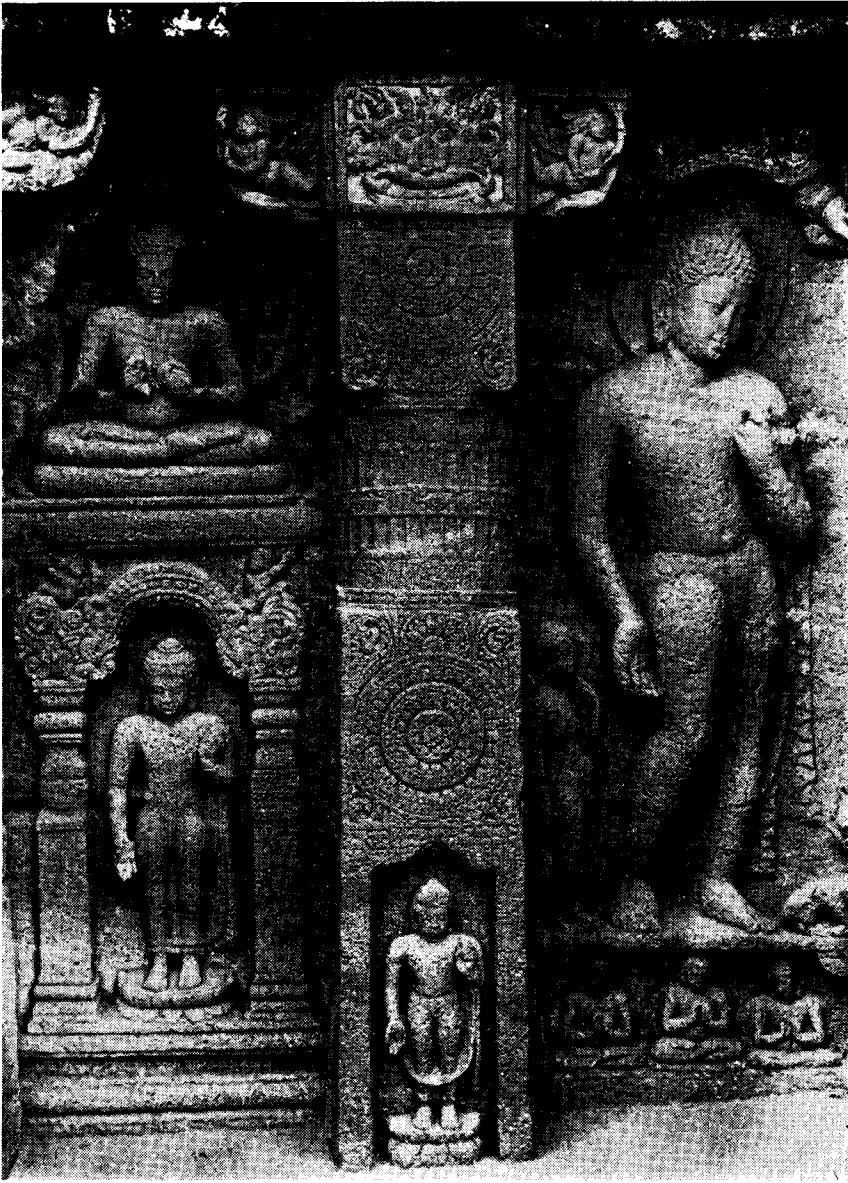


pilasters on either side of the *mukha-maṇḍapa* and a standing figure of the *yaksha* Kubera on either side of the *chaitya*-window. The first set of sculpture flanking the entrance depicts Buddha. In the sinister panel he appears in his mendicant's garb at the palace-door at Kapilavastu where his son Rāhula, led by his mother Yaśodharā, receives the begging-bowl from him (plate VI). His peerless wisdom and compassion are indicated by his superhuman stature and spiritual expression. The crown held over his hallowed head by heavenly cherubs further enhances this effect. The scene is, no doubt, inspired by the painting in Cave 17 and is a masterpiece of Ajanta sculpture as the latter is of Ajanta painting. The corresponding figure on the dexter side (plate VII) depicts Buddha in *varada-mudrā*, his figure steeped in *karuṇā*. On his right side is a standing woman bereft of all ornaments and near his left foot is another woman, this time prostrating. Probably both represent Āmrāpālī, the favourite courtesan of Vaiśālī, who, according to Aśvaghoṣa, appeared 'in white garments and devoid of body-paint and ornaments before Buddha like a woman of good family at the time of worshipping' and 'prostrated her slender body like a blossoming mango-creeper and stood up full of piety'.

As a total composition, the principal figures in the niches flanking the entrance stand gracefully in slight *tribhaṅga* postures half-inclined inwards and, therefore, facing the devotee entering the shrine, their benign expressions creating a feeling of assurance in the heart of the worshipper. The soft mellifluous contours of the bodies which were enriched originally by painted plaster, coupled with the charming expression exuding spirituality, make these figures stand out from the rest.

The adjacent panels on either side depict Buddha as an object of cult worship; on the sinister side, he is portrayed as standing on a double lotus with *varada-mudrā* against the drum of the *stūpa* under a finely-carved *makara-torana*, above which rises the *aṇḍa*, *harmikā* and triple *chhatrāvalī* flanked by *nāga*-celestials. The corresponding panel on the right has two compartments, the upper one having a seated figure of Buddha in *dharmachakra-pravartana-mudrā* and the lower, a standing figure in *varada-mudrā*.

The upper part of the façade is relieved by a central *chaitya*-window of an elegant design, with a figure of richly-bedecked and majestically-standing *yaksha* on either side. These two guardian *yakshas*, in the classical Gupta-Vākāṭaka idiom, are generically related to the *yakshas* of the Sātavāhana period (Pitalkhora and Nasik). Verging on corpulence, they stand in *tribhaṅga* posture with a tight belt (*udara-bandha*) around their belly. The general contours of the body are soft and fleshy. The legs are rather heavy and short but less so than their archetypes. The facial expression is calm and charming with a smile concealed under a thick lower lip. The round halo around the face bestows an air of spirituality. A dwarf attendant emptying the bag of wealth of its jingling



*Plate VII. Ajanta, Cave 19: Buddha figure flanking the entrance*

contents adds greatly, by contrast, to the majesty of the *yaksha*, who has a Buddha-figure on his crest which is a unique feature.

The lord of the *nāgas* with his consort on his left and a standing whisk-bearer on his right (plate VIII), carved in a niche on the flanking wall at right angles to the façade of Cave 19, is a product of superb



*Plate VIII. Ajanta, Cave 19: nāgarāja with his consort*

artistry. Steeped in dignity, he is seated on a rocky platform in *mahārāja-līlā* posture with a seven-hooded cobra behind his head. The form of the body is graceful and slim and bears an expression of peace and devotion. The lavish ornamentation, besides adding beauty to the sculpture, makes up for the paucity of costume worn by the figures.

All the *vihāras* of Ajanta usually have a *garbha-griha* to enshrine a

colossal figure of Buddha. Cave 1 contains a fine specimen of such a sculpture depicting Buddha in *anarmachakra-pravartana-mudrā* (see above pl. III). On the pedestal is seen the Wheel of Law flanked by a deer on either side to suggest the provenance of the sermon, viz., Mṛiga-dāva (Sarnath). The main object of worship, Buddha, is flanked on either side by a stout whisk-bearer. These attendant figures are similar to the *yaksha*-figures on either side of the *chaitya*-window in Cave 19 in regard to modelling and may, therefore, represent the work of the same group of artists. The *vidyādhara*s, with garlands in hands on either side of the painted halo amidst clouds represented by ringlets, are also well-conceived figures. The composition is extremely well-integrated and the attention of the onlooker is focussed on the main object of worship. The sculpture, however, tends to be rather heavy and lacks the grace of those on the façade of Cave 19.

The story-telling pattern followed in the paintings of Ajanta is at times repeated in sculpture. One such example is to be seen over the cell to the left of entrance to Cave 1. The four great encounters in the life of Gautama which prompted him to forsake the life of pleasure are carved here on the façade (see above, p. 8). The life of pleasure led by the prince is also depicted in the panel above the central *chaitya*-arch, where he is seen listening to the music produced by a lady holding a *vīṇā* on her lap. The two panels to the right depict the young prince Gautama on a horse-driven chariot going for a ride, where scenes of death, old age and disease confront him.

Cave 26, a *chaitya-griha* not far removed in time from Cave 19, contains on its interior walls a large number of small and large sculptured panels, suggesting a definite departure from the earlier tradition of decorating the interior wall of caves with paintings. The wall-space on the left of the cave is covered by two large panels connected with the life of Buddha. While the rear and right sides bear panels depicting Buddha flanked by the Bodhisattvas. On the left side is depicted the temptation of Buddha by Māra; its lower portion showing the dalliance of his daughters to allure Buddha (plate IX). Failing in his attempt to disturb Buddha meditating under the Bodhi-tree, Māra thought of spreading a golden snare and commanded his youthful daughters Rati (lust), Trishṇā (thirst) and Ārati (delight) to tempt him by their bewitching charm. Their coquettish gestures, attractive dance and melodious music, all failed to tempt Gautama and swerve him from the path of Enlightenment. They are then shown seated on the right lower portion with their father, dejected at the failure of their mission. The story-telling quality of the sculpture, the unity of the composition and the ingenuous disposition of the figures attest to the mastery of the sculptor in his art equalling that of his brother-artist in painting.

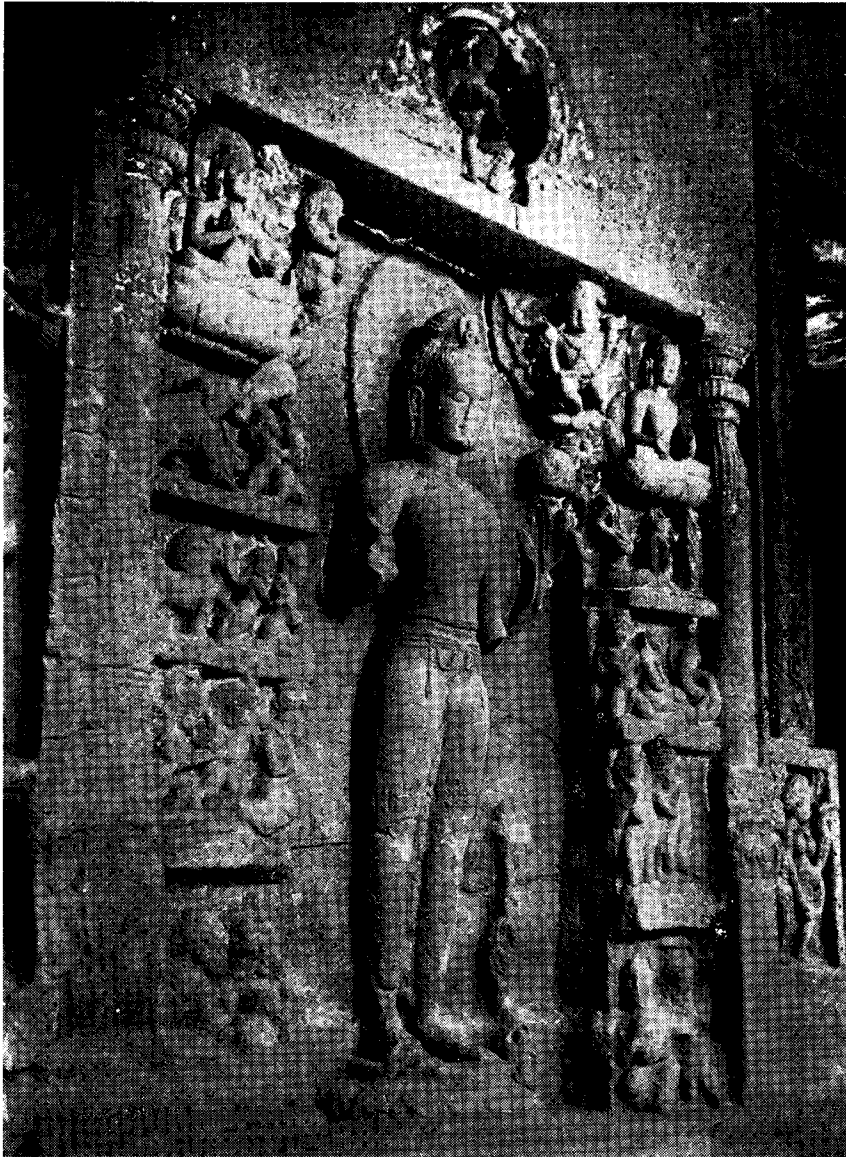
Under the influence of polytheism of Mahāyāna, the worship of the Bodhisattvas began to have an irresistible appeal to the Buddhist laity



*Plate IX. Ajanta, Cave 26: temptation of Buddha*

on account of the more humane qualities and the spirit of self-sacrifice of the Bodhisattvas to the extent of abjuring the highest knowledge and Buddhahood for the good of humanity. Bodhisattvas, who had till now been sculptured as attendants of Buddha, now came to be carved independently. Particularly popular was the litany of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara depicted both in painting (*garbha-griha* of Cave 2 and veran-

dah of Cave 17) and in a large sculptured panel in the verandah of Cave 4 (plate X) and another two panels near Cave 26. The litany usually contains a central figure of Avalokiteśvara with eight small panels, four on each side, showing him in the act of giving protection to the devotees from the calamities of life. He is usually shown with *jaṭā-mukuta* (matted hair) with Amitābha on his forehead. He holds a



*Plate X. Ajanta, Cave 4: Avalokiteśvara litany*

lotus-stalk, with an opening bud in one hand and generally a rosary in the other. He is invoked in all cases of danger and distress, and it is interesting to notice that they are varied, such as those that caravan-leader might suffer in his journey by land and sea, the fear of wild animals like the lion, elephant and cobra and of goblins, fire, assassins, incarceration and shipwreck. Such panels had a special appeal to the people engaged in commerce by land and sea. Similar panels are met with at the Buddhist cave-groups of Aurangabad, Ellora and Kanheri, the one at Aurangabad being the most vivid and the best executed one. One of the representations at Kanheri depicts Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara with his consort Tārā standing in the centre amidst smaller panels illustrating his benevolent actions in granting protection to devotees in distress.

Besides these representations, mention must be made of the sculptures of *yaksha* Pāñchika and his consort Hārītī, the goddess auspicious to children. Pāñchika (also called Jambhala, the Buddhist god of wealth) and Hārītī are invariably met with in the monasteries of the Gandhāra region and their worship also became popular in western India. Cave 2 of Ajanta and Cave 7 of Aurangabad have subsidiary shrines dedicated to them, while at Ellora they are sculptured in a separate niche in the middle of the group of the Buddhist caves. At Ajanta, smaller panels depicting only Hārītī with children or with Pāñchika are carved in Caves 2 and 23 on the architraves of the cells inside the *vihāras*.

## II. The Art of Ajanta : Murals

The oldest and near contemporary text with Ajanta dealing with fine arts is the *Vishnudharmottara* (circa sixth century A.D.). In the Chapter *Chitrasūtra* it mentions that painting is an art *par-excellence*: *kalānām pravaraṁ chitraṁ dharma kāmārtha mokṣadam* or *yathā janānām pravaraḥ kṣitīśha-tathā kalānām-iaḥ chitrakalpah*.

The art of painting has a great antiquity in India. The paintings in the caverns of Hoshangabad, Pachmarhi and those recently discovered at Adamgarh near Bhopal and at Gupetsvar near Gwalior would suggest that this art was practised by the Middle Stone Age cave-dwellers. Throughout the centuries this art has been practised by the village potter to decorate the pots and pans and to relieve the drudgery of life. The *Vishnudharmottara* (Chapter 35) notes a myth about the origin of *chitra*. It mentions that the sage Nārāyaṇa with the good of the people at his heart propounded the *chitra-sūtra*. He is said to have drawn the figure of a beautiful woman on the ground with mango juice. Out of this figure was created a beautiful *apsarā* by name Urvashī. The sage taught this art to Viśvakarmā, the divine architect. The significance of this myth lies in the fact that painting and perhaps sculpture were practised together by artists under the general supervision of the master-architect.

Before we go into the question of the art of Ajanta paintings it would be appropriate to understand the technique of Ajanta paintings. The Ajanta artists employed a very ingenious technique in preparing the 'ground' and in executing the paintings. The 'carrier' for the paintings was the compact volcanic rock with its many cavities. The surface of the rock was made uneven and rough so as to provide a firm grip to the covering plaster. The holes in the volcanic rock further acted as keys in keeping the plaster firmly fixed to the wall.

The 'ground' of the paintings was made of mud-plaster to which were added vegetable fibres, paddy husk, rock-grit and sand as reinforcing and binding material. The ground-coat of this plaster, which was laid on the rock, usually consisted of coarse material with fair amount of fibrous vegetable material, rock-grit and sand. Over this basal layer was added another layer of mud and ferruginous earth also mixed with rock-powder or sand and finer fibrous material. The surface was then treated with a thin layer of lime-wash over which pigments were applied. The plaster was reinforced, in a few cases, with cloth, stretched on the surface and paintings drawn thereon. This new feature has just recently come to our notice in one cave as a result of careful observation of a young scholar-cum photographer.



The pigments used by the Ajanta artists, with the exception of black, consisted of inorganic minerals such as red and yellow ochres, lapis lazuli for the blue and *terra verda* or glaucomite for the green. The black pigment was derived from lamp-black and the white from kaolin, lime or gypsum. The ochrous clays such as the red and yellow were procured from the clayey products of the weathering of the rock. The pigments were ground and mixed with water and applied on the surface. It has not been possible to prove the existence of the binding medium such as gum or glue. Perhaps animal glue was employed.

The *Vishṇuśarmottara* also mentions five primary colours: *mūlarāṅgāḥ smṛitāḥ pañcha śvetaḥ pīto vilomataḥ kṛishṇo nīlaścha rājendra shataton-tarataḥ smṛitāḥ*. The *śveta* or white colour was *sudhā* or lime, *pīta* was *harīṭala* or yellow ochre, *nīla* was *rājavarṭa* or lapis. At another place, the text mentions *śveta*-white, *rakta*-red, *pīta*-yellow, *kṛishṇa*-black and *hārīṭa*-green as the primary colours.

We next deal with the various types of *vartanas* or the use of the brush for shading purposes. The *Vishṇuśarmottara* mentions three types of shading : (1) *patravartana* with lines having the shape of *patra* or leaf, (2) *hairika vartana* or very minute (*sūkshma*), while the (3) *binduvartana* is formed by dots. The brushes used for the paintings were very carefully made out of a sweet smelling rod of *khachora* mixed with boiled rice rolled into a pointed stump. The *tūlikā* was a finer brush made out of a thin bamboo rod with a cotton swab or a small feather attached to it. A *lekhanī*, which is another name of *tūlikā*, was used for applying colours. It was made from soft hair from the ear of a calf and fixed with lac. It was either thick and broad or thin according as it was meant for different types of painting and shading. Sometimes hair from the squirrel's tail and the belly of the sheep was used for making the brushes.

Nowhere the names of the artist of Ajanta or anything about their life is mentioned. However, on the basis of the available historical data, it appears that they had their compact organization in the form of guilds consisting of different kinds of specialists relating to the art of painting. The guilds had also arrangements for training young students in the crafts.

#### *The subject-matter of Ajanta paintings*

The Buddhist monks following this age-old tradition thought of painting the stories from the life of Buddha on the walls of caves for the benefit of the visiting pilgrims. As already mentioned, the Jātaka stories were best suited for the propagation of the faith. The Ajanta artist, therefore, selected under the direction of the Master-priest a particular Jātaka, for example, the *Chhaddanta Jātaka* to demonstrate Bodhisattva's boundless generosity, the *Vessantara Jātaka* his charity, the *Vidhurapandita Jātaka* his wisdom. The object was to emphasise the importance of virtuous living and the cultivation of good qualities (*pāramitā*) rather than the



Fig. 4: Ajanta, Cave 10: Part of a scene depicting worship of the Bodhi tree

philosophical and doctrinal import of Buddhism. Along with Jātaka stories, scenes from the life of Buddha as Gautama—his birth in the Lumbini garden, events of his childhood, Māra's futile attempt to tempt him, his attainment of the highest knowledge, the conversion of Nanda, subjugation of Nalagiri, were painted on the walls. The near realistic and yet imaginative depiction of the Jātaka stories must have created a deep impression on the devotees of the spiritual grandeur of Buddha and the creed he preached.

The subject-matter of the early paintings in Caves 10 and 9 (circa second and first century B.C. respectively) appear to be worship of the Bodhi-tree and *stūpa* by a royal party (fig. 4). In Cave 10 are also painted scenes from the *Chhaddanta Jātaka* and *Sāma Jātaka*. In all these paintings, we do not notice any pictorial rendering of the Master for such a depiction was forbidden by the Master and was not, therefore, employed by the Theravāda artists. Instead, they depicted Buddha symbolically by painting either the *Bodhi* tree, the throne, the wheel, the *pādukas* or *triratna*.

However, under the growing influence of Mahāyāna many more caves were added and were simultaneously embellished with paintings. This middle period of painting, commencing from the last part of the fifth century A.D. specialized in the depiction of narrative stories from the Jātakas and *Avadānas*. The *Mahājanaka Jātaka* (Cave 1) elucidates the manner in which the Jātaka stories were narrated. Besides the *Mahājanaka Jātaka*, the important Jātakas and *Avadānas* painted on the walls of Ajanta are:

*Śaikhapāla-Jātaka*, Cave 1  
*Chāmpēyya-Jātaka*, Cave 1  
*Vidhurapandita-Jātaka*, Cave 2  
*Vessantara-Jātaka*, Cave 17  
*Haimsa-Jātaka*, Cave 17  
*Sīṃhalāvadāna*, Cave 17  
*Śibi-Jātaka*, Cave 17

The delineation of Mānushī Buddhas in human form was another subject in which the artist took great delight and interest. The painting of Mānushī Buddhas on the door of Cave 17 is very interesting from iconographic point of view.

The ceiling of the *vihāras* were also painted with a variety of subjects. The growing influence of the Mahāyāna creed brought in its trail ideas of the Buddhist paradise and as a result celestial beings like *kinṇaras*, *vidyādharas* and *gandharvas* soaring in the heavenly regions amidst clouds were depicted. Floral patterns, geometrical designs jewelry-motifs mythical beings, playful birds and humans were portrayed on the ceilings (plate XI). A decorative band in the roundel on the ceiling of the *yaksha* shrine in Cave 2 shows a chain of twenty-three geese amidst a lotus-creeper, each goose rendered naturalistically and yet differently from each other

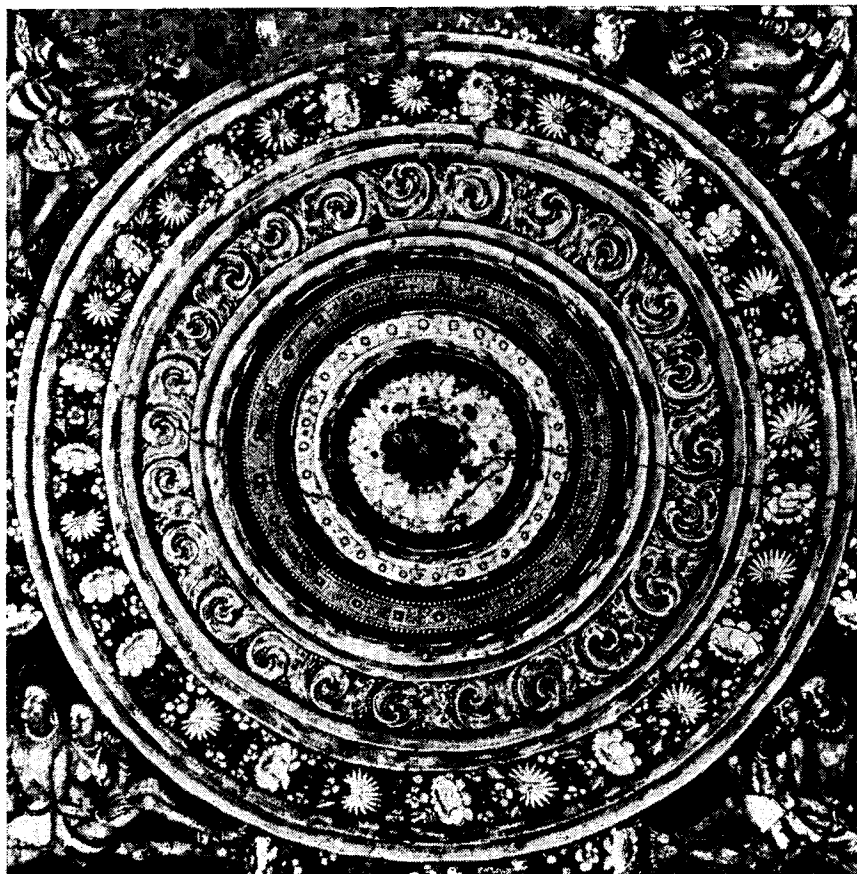


Plate XI. Ajanta, Cave 2: part of ceiling decoration

so as to evoke admiration for the artist who produced their graceful movements. The roundels with concentric bands of variegated colours and patterns around a central lotus with a *gandharva* figure or couples in the corners amidst clouds were a very common composition of the ceiling decoration.

The tradition of painting the flat ceilings of caves in compartments such as those seen at Ajanta is noticed in Tun-huang caves in north-central China and also in the Bamiyan caves in Afghanistan. This arrangement follows a pattern, for these compartmentalized paintings indicate the beams and cross beams of structural buildings. Even the roundels appearing in architectural compartments are ingeniously integrated with architectural elements.

Many paintings bear painted inscriptions indicating that it was the gift of some *Śākya bhikṣu* for the attainment of supreme knowledge by all



*Plate XII. Ajanta, Cave 1 : Bodhisattva Padmapāṇi*

beings. In one inscription the gift is said to endow on the donor good looks, good luck and good qualities. The miracle of Śrāvastī was also a very popular subject at Ajanta. Rows of Buddha figures, one above the other, came to be painted so as to depict the Thousand Buddhas. In Cave 2 there is an inscribed record mentioning the subject as 'Thousand Buddhas' (*Budha Sahasa*).

### *Placement of subjects*

The narrative subjects at Ajanta are painted on the expansive canvas of the walls and have no formal imitation of frames. A story may cover the entire wall and at times extend on the adjacent wall, at an angle of ninety degrees (*Mahājanaka Jātaka*). A few scenes appear in panels and these are painted on pilasters like the famous toilet-scene in Cave 17. The painted scenes on the walls of the *yaksha* shrine and the Hārītī-Pāñchika shrine in Cave 2 form a total composition showing worshippers approaching the *yakshas* and Hārītī-Pāñchika images for worship. In the case of the *yaksha*-shrine, the setting of the painted scene is placed in temporary structures like those erected in a fair while the scenes in the Hārītī-Pāñchika shrine are placed in the garden surroundings and are framed by delicately curling foliage.

The famous panels of Bodhisattva Padmaṣāṇi (plate XII) and Vajrapāṇi on the back wall of the hall, on either side of the *antarāla* also conform to a plan. They usher a visitor to the magnificent image of Buddha in the sanctum sanctorum. The trinity formed by the Buddha in the centre and two Bodhisattvas on either side is depicted in sculpture and painting.

The back wall of the verandah of Cave 17 fortunately retains a fair amount of paintings and thus helps in understanding the manner the

*Plate XIII. Ajanta, Cave 17 : paintings and sculptures on the entrance*



exposed portion of the Cave which received brilliant sun-light were treated. Here, above the door lintel, are painted the Mānushī-Buddhas with the *gandharva* couples below it in the long frieze. The sculptured *vṛikshikās* above the door-frame are also plastered and painted forming part of the total composition (plate XIII). On either side of this magnificent door-frame are painted figures of *gandharvas* descending from heavenly abode and in an attitude of obeisance to the Mānushī-Buddhas. However, further wall space, on either side, is devoted to the depiction of a Jātaka story (*Vessantara Jātaka*), subjugation of Nalagiri, an incident from the life of Buddha. Flanking the entrance were also painted figures of Bodhisattvas. The short end on one side of the verandah depicts the wheel of *saṃsāra*. The total effect is enhanced by the treatment of the ceiling. It will thus be appreciated that the painting, sculptures and architecture in each cave were so integrated so as to enhance the cumulative effect.

The late paintings at Ajanta consist of paintings of Buddha and the Bodhisattvas. They are painted on architraves and pillars in Caves 10 and 9. To the same period can also be attributed the subject like the Miracle of Śrāvastī and these are usually painted on the walls of the antechamber (*antarāla*).

A word is also necessary about the lighting arrangement for seeing the paintings. There are indications to suggest that when the paintings were actually drawn, oil lamps were used. These were suspended to iron hooks found embedded in the plaster. This feature has come to light as a result of close observation in the recent past. Normally the paintings were seen by devotees during day time. It is our experience that after entering the cave it takes some time for the eyes to get adjusted to the dim light. It is not unlikely that white cloth sheets were used for reflecting light. Thereafter, on the dark walls appear myriads of figures as if issuing from the wall surface and taking definite shape and form. The caves get beautifully illuminated when the rays of the setting sun penetrate the caves through doors and windows and the walls are bathed in the reflected glory of the sun's rays. It is a wonderful experience to watch the figures in normal light and to appreciate the effect of shading and of thick and thin lines which help in bestowing plastic modelling to the figures drawn on the flat canvas.

The various episodes from the Jātakas come to life with an almost dramatic appeal for the artist has employed various *rasas* or aesthetic moods in the delineation of the subject. However, the paintings are steeped in two dominant moods: *karuṇa rasa* (compassion or pathos) and *śānta rasa* (placidity or peace). All the other *rasas* such as *śṛiṅgāra*, *hāsyā*, *vīra*, *raudra*, *bhayānaka*, *vībhatsa*, *adbhuta* are subservient to these. These *rasas* perform the same function as in a drama where situations are created which are at once full of pathos and gaiety to the extent of evoking laughter.

The *Vishṇudharmottara* describes the blemishes and merits of paintings. The eight merits of paintings, according to the author, are: *sthāna pramāṇa bhūlambho madhuratvaṃ vibhaktatā sādṛśyaṃ kṣayavṛddhi cha guṇāśṭaka-idaṃ-smṛitaṃ*. The same subject is dealt with by Yośodhara, in the commentary on the *Kāmasūtra* where the limbs of painting are described as six-fold: appropriate representation of form (*rūpabheda*), correct structure or proportion (*pramāṇam*), infusion of action and feeling (*bhāva-yojanain*), infusion of the quality of grace (*lāvanyaṃ yojanam*), similitude or likeness (*sādṛśyaṃ*) and the last dealing with the use of brush and colour. The quality of *sādṛśya*, however, which is very important is not intended to portray the mirror-like likeness but the essential realism of the portrayed. At another place the *Vishṇudharmottara* makes this point of *sādṛśya* very clear. It mentions that the artist must be able to delineate the distinction between a sleeping person and a dead person. The former must be shown full of life force while the dead person completely devoid of it.

The Ajanta paintings have great aesthetic quality and that they exude warmth and as it were 'breathe' and 'smile'. The *Vishṇudharmottara* describes this quality as follows :

*'Lasatīva cha bhūlambho shishyatīva tathā nṛipa hasatīva cha mādhuryaṃ sajīva iva dṛśyate'*

*'Sāsṃasya iva yachchitraṃ śubhaiakṣṇam'.*

'The painting glistens and embraces by its disposition as if coming out to meet the spectator and smiles with grace and appears absolutely full of vitality'. 'It breathes and such a *chitra* is really full of all auspicious signs'. It is this quality of Ajanta paintings which keeps the visitors spellbound. He forgets his existence and is lost in ecstasy. The exquisite colour-taste, perfect brush-work and sense of modelling lend such vividness to the pictures that they have an irresistible dramatic appeal. The artist is so careful about minor details in building up the narrative effect that one almost feels the breeze which makes the ornaments and the banners painted on the walls swing and sway and flutter.

In the narrative scenes hundreds of figures are painted yet each and every one of it is distinct from the other. The different episodes in the compositions are separated by the clever use of architectural features, and vegetation. The difference in space and time from one incident to the other is also brought out by clever dispositions of scenes away from each other and in appropriate surroundings. Individual scenes are characterized by perfect grouping of figures, the principal character being given the greatest attention and is usually placed in the centre. The episodes in the *Mahājanaka Jātaka* illustrate this point very beautifully. The artists sometimes take the liberty of not portraying essential architectural features so as to depict the scene without any hindrance. For example, the pillar of the structures under which a dance-scene is depicted is indicated but not painted lest it obstructs the view of the dance (plate XIV).





*Plate XIV. Ajanta, Cave 1 : scene from the  
Mahājanaka Jātaka depicting a dance*

The greatest quality of Ajanta paintings is, however, that it is imbued with feeling and can be appropriately called a *bhāvachitra*. *Bhāvachitra* is defined as that type of painting where the *rasas* such as *śringāra*, etc. are revealed to a person by mere observation and which create wonder in mind (*śringārādiraso yatra dṛṣṇānādeva gamyate/bhāvachitraṁ tadā-khyataṁ chittakautukakārakaṁ*).

It will thus be seen that the Ajanta paintings conform to the highest standards laid down in the *Vishnudharmottara*. In fact one feels that the text of *Vishnudharmottara*, which is later in date than Ajanta, codifies all the norms and standards which the Ajanta artists prescribed for themselves. The painting is described in *Vishnudharmottara* as possessing the quality of dispelling anxiety and bringing forth prosperity and the cause of unequalled and unmixed delight. It fulfills the main objectives of human life, namely *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *moksha*.

The influence of Ajanta paintings was felt over a wide area in Ceylon, Nepal, Tibet, Afghanistan, Mongolia, China, and even distant Japan came under its influence. The Ajanta mannerism is seen in the paintings of all these countries to a smaller or greater degree. The paintings at Sigiriya in Ceylon are closest to Ajanta. They almost appear to be an extension of the Ajanta tradition. The wall paintings at Bagh, about 250 kilometres north of Ajanta, suggest that the artist employed at this place belonged to the same school.

Ajantaism assumed new forms in different spheres and in remote climes. Says a Sanskrit poet:

*kshaṇe kshaṇe yaṁ navatām upaiti tad eva  
rūpaṁ ramanīyatāyāḥ*

‘the nature of beauty is such as assumes new forms every moment’, so does the art of Ajanta.

### III. Tabo : the Himalayan Ajanta

Dr. D. L. Snellgrove in the preface to his book *Buddhist Himalaya* stated that 'The Himalayas can still testify to its activeness, for these regions (Nepal valley and Kashmir) which once saw the passage of Buddhism to Tibet have now become dependent on Tibet for the life of their religion. The source in India has long been dead and only the Tibetans possess the living traditions which can enliven the ancient places.' Recent history, however, has robbed the above remark of its validity. Tibet no longer plays any part in the domain of Buddhism so far as the Himalayan region is concerned. It is once again India that is providing the cultural substratum, as of old, for the understanding of Buddhism. In this context I thought it worthwhile to present before this scholarly gathering an account of the monasteries in the Spiti valley of Himachal Pradesh so as to promote renewed interest in the study of Himalayan art.

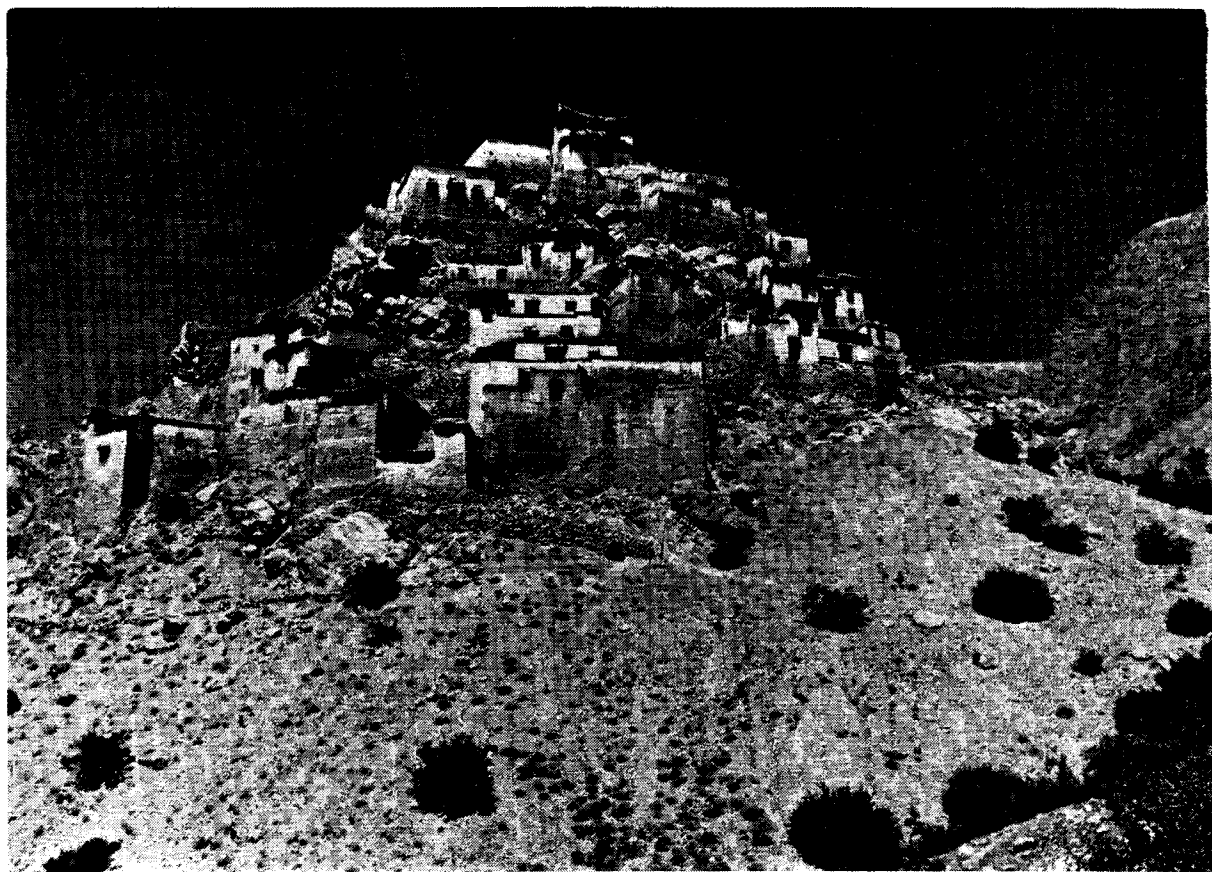
It was in 1914 that Dr. A. H. Francke of the Moravian Mission wrote his work *Antiquities of Indian Tibet* and this was published by the Archaeological Survey of India. In this work he gave an account of his journey in the Himalayan region undertaken in 1909 and onwards. In the companion volume of his work published in 1925, Dr. Francke collected together Chronicles of Ladakh bearing on the history and antiquity of the region with special reference to the spread of Buddhism in that region. Tabo and Ki monasteries find a reference in these two works. The only other work that was undertaken thereafter appears to be by Giuseppe Tucci and Snellgrove. Unfortunately, no proper documentation of the various *gomphas* in this region was made nor was any effort made for their protection. It was in the year 1965 that I visited the *gomphas* in the Lahul and Spiti region in order to draw up a plan for their proper conservation. As a result of this visit, the *gomphas* at the Tabo have been brought under the protection by the Archaeological Survey of India and I am glad to say that the work of preservation of the paintings and the structures has made satisfactory progress.

During the course of my visit to this region, I inspected, besides the monasteries at Ki and Tabo, the monasteries at Tanguit and Khoksar. However, I shall confine myself to a general description of Ki and a somewhat critical evaluation of Tabo. The *gomphas* of Tabo are extremely important for the appreciation and understanding of the art of the Gu-ge style which flourished in the region of western Tibet from the tenth century to almost up to the end of the seventeenth century. It is well known that the Gu-ge kingdom disintegrated as a result of repeated campaigns of king Segne-nam-gyel of Ladakh and only about sixteen years later both Gu-ge and Ladakh were at the mercy of Central Tibetans and the Tibetan frontier just excluded Tabo.

The paintings at Tabo are fortunately better preserved and vie in splendour with those of Ajanta and the monastery can be described as the Himalayan Ajanta. This does not, however, mean direct stylistic relationship with Ajanta as they are separated by almost six hundred years. The paintings also differ in another respect, namely that the carrier of the Tabo paintings is not the rock as at Ajanta but consists of pressed-clay walls of the monastery. The paintings have a family relationship to those at Tsa-pa-rang, mTho-gling and Mang-Nang-Nang in Gu-ge proper and owe to a great extent to the art of Kashmir and to some extent to the Pāla school of art which influenced Nepalese and through it the Tibetan art. The Gu-ge style is represented at its best at Tabo and in the present political context they assume great importance as the only surviving representations of the Gu-ge style in India. Perhaps the Alchi monastery in Leh may have some early paintings influenced by the Gu-ge style.

Before we actually describe the monastery it will not be out of place to briefly review the politico-religious conditions which favoured the spread of Buddhism in the Spiti region. At the end of the tenth century, western Tibet came under the rule of a new dynasty known as the kings of Gu-ge. Of the line of kings of this dynasty, Ye-she-ö (light of wisdom) is important to us for the understanding of the spread of Buddhism. Further names of two significant personalities of this period come to our mind. These are: (1) the renowned Tibetan scholar Rin-chen S'ang-po (A.D. 958-1055) and the Indian Master Atīśa (A.D. 982-1054). Rin-chen S'ang-po was one of the twenty-one youths sent to India by Ye-she-ö, the king of Gu-ge. He studied in Kashmir for many years and visited Buddhist centres in central India. He had as many as seventy-five masters. He initiated a whole school of Tibetan scholarship by translating many Indian works in Tibetan. Rin-chen S'ang-po must have travelled into India down the Sutlej valley and across the foothills to the Beas valley and then north-westward to Kashmir or perhaps he might have taken the northern route through the Spiti and the Chandra valleys. The Tabo *gompha* is attributed to Rin-chen S'ang-po and there is inscriptional evidence of this fact in one of the painted inscriptions in the *gompha*. The inscription reads: 'This temple was first founded by the ancestor of the Bodhisattva, in the ape-year and now 46 years later the Royal Descendant the Mighty One Ch'ang-Chup-ö, motivated by the thought of enlightenment, has carried out repairs to this temple'. This record clearly indicates that the kings of Gu-ge, Ye-she-ö and his nephew Ch'ang-Chup-ö took special interest in Tabo. In this *gompha* are set on the wall twenty-four stucco images of divinities of the *Vajradhātu mandala* of which the central figure is a fourfold image of Vairocana. Two images of Rin-chen S'ang-po are placed near the image of Vairocana.

Atīśa arrived in Gu-ge when he was 60 years old. Having got his initiation at a very young age into the Hevajra cult from a *yogin* named



*Plate XV. Ki monastery: general view*

Rāhula-gupta he went to various monasteries and travelled to Tibet through Nepal. He stayed for three years in Gu-ge as the Chief Religious Guide and thereafter went to central Tibet. After visiting Lhasa and Yer-pa he finally settled in Nye-thang. He died in 1054 and *Chō-ten* was erected over his relics. He was responsible for influencing the religious thought of Tibet to a very great extent.

#### *Ki Monastery*

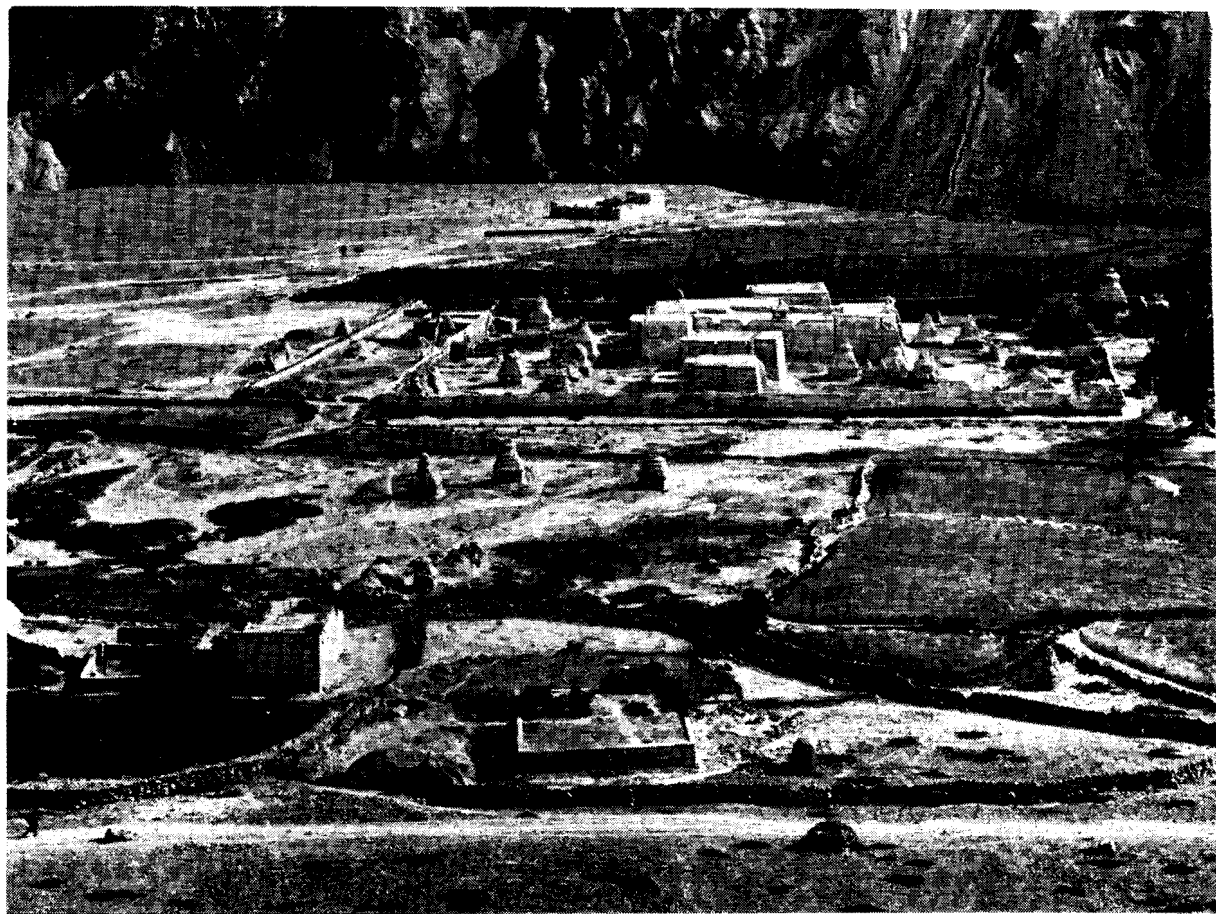
Situated on the conical hill about 300 metres high from the river-bed on the eastern bank of the Spiti, the Ki monastery (plate XV) is a picturesque pile of buildings looking from a distance like a hill fortress. It is approached by a difficult pathway from Kaza, the subdivisional headquarters of Lahul and Spiti District along the left bank of the Spiti river and leads to the Ki village at the foot of the hill. A steep climb from the village Ki leads one to the gate of the monastery which consists of an unostentatious structure of mud bricks with a low gallery atop. From the entrance to the summit, a winding and uneven stepped passage leads from one tier to the other through the residential quarters of the Lamas. The tiers are constructed in random rubble masonry in mud mortar.

The houses are built out of mud bricks or pressed clay each with a small wooden door frame and a window, door jambs of which are decorated with a raised and burnished black coloured decoration. The door frames are also surmounted by some wood-work. The monastery on the top of the hill consists of a set of buildings on three sides of a small courtyard. The *gompha* known as Mane-lang is an isolated and independent structure on one side of the courtyard. Opposite Mane-lang is a building on a high plinth called Du-khang which is the principal place of worship and a place of religious instruction for the young Lamas. On the eastern side there is a double-storeyed structure consisting of buildings called Nagpo-gurusam, Chum-jhin, Zhin-shung and Ku-lung with several interconnected passages, apartments for the stores, kitchen and sacred chambers of worship not usually accessible to outsiders. From the archaeological and artistic point of view, Mane-lang and Nagpo-gurusam are of special interest as both of these contain remnants of old paintings, while the Chum-jhin contains a large number of ancient *thangkas* of great artistic and iconographic interest. The monastery was ravaged many a time during wars and the Dogra invasion of 1837 caused great damage to the monastery.

Mane-lang is a small oblong structure having a half-open verandah and has a covered circumambulation path around the inner room which opens into the verandah. The room contains a huge round colourful prayer-wheel set rotating by a mechanical device. It contains on the inner side the sacred *mantra* 'Om Mani Padme Hum' and other religious texts. The Lama operating the prayer-wheel (*Dhug Jur*) is supposed to mechanically repeat the scriptures with each rotation of the drum. On the four walls of this building are painted figures of Buddha and the Bodhisattvas. The rear and the southern walls have two rows of paintings, the lower row containing larger figures, each with a halo behind the head. The paintings on the eastern wall also consist of two rows of figures. Female deities with many hands are also seen on the eastern wall. Three-headed male and female figures also find place among the painted subjects. The proper identification of the subjects painted on the walls will have to wait till such time as the paintings are cleaned, photographed and subjected to a critical study. There are no paintings from the ground level up to the height of three to four feet (0.92 to 1.22 m.) the surface being merely ochre washed. There is a painted band of inscription along the top bordering the paintings four to eight inches (101.6 to 203.2 mm.) below the ceiling.

The outer front wall of the verandah flanking the doorway was also once painted and the surface has suffered a lot of damage and only traces of paintings can be seen which do not help in a proper assessment or recognition of the subjects.

The structure consists of compact mud in layers with a flat roof of earth-work supported on wooden frame-work and rafters and beams.



*Plate XVI. Tabo monastery: general view*

The building proper stands on an artificially raised floor to form the topmost tier and is about nine (2·74 m.) to ten feet (3·05 m.) high and appears to be one of the latest additions to the monastery-complex and may not be older than one hundred and fifty years or so. But all the same, it deserves protection on account of the paintings it contains. The building with its circumambulatory path can be compared with the Lha-Lun temple in Spiti (Lilung on the Survey map) described by H. Lee Shuttleworth in *Lha-lun Temple, Spy-ti*, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India, No. 39. Unlike the Lha-Lun temple, Mane-lang is a later structure but retains the ancient architectural tradition.

The structure known as Nagpo-gurusam is situated to the east of the courtyard. It contains ancient paintings, but these are now restricted to the southern wall surface, the rest of the paintings on the other walls having been obliterated by damage or subsequent plastering of the surface. The painted surface is almost completely covered from view by the stucco figures kept on a raised platform against the wall. The paintings in the Nagpo Gurusam appear to be earlier than those in Mane-lang.

The subjects painted consist of Buddha in various attitudes.

Above Nagpo-gurusam is a hall known as Chum-jhin which is a veritable mine of old *thangkas*. Most of the *thangkas* are of Tibetan origin and are religious offerings from Tibetan Lamas. The monastery has besides a fairly good collection of brass and silver ware required for daily use and for ritualistic worship. Some of the objects are of delicate workmanship and the artisans engaged in preparing the pots and pans still practice this ancient avocation. The orchestra containing a variety of musical instruments is equally interesting. The masks and costumes used by the dancers are colourful and gay. The pinnacle, with the *triratna* and *munda* is considered the lord of the soil and is perched on the top of the monastery complex.

### *The Monastery at Tabo*

Enclosed within a fairly high compound wall of rubble masonry and pressed clay about 100 yards square (83·61 m.), the monastery at Tabo (plate XVI) is a picturesque group of mud-brick structures (plate XVII) that have defied the ravages of time for the last many centuries. The group consists of the following nine structures of importance.

1. Du-wang.
2. Zelāmā (after the painted image of Zelāmā on the wall).
3. Gon-khang (a place of worship).
4. Chambā Chibo (The hall containing the image of Buddha).
5. Dom-lang.
6. Lang Chedbo (the big hall).
7. Ser-lang (Ser meaning gold and, therefore, a *gompha* with profusion of golden colour).
8. Chil-khang (middle room).
9. Lankar chung (formerly used for the initiation of nuns).

There are besides a large number of *stūpas* or *Chot Tens* within and outside the monastery.

The part of the monastery forming the portion of Du-wang, Zelāmā, and Gon-khang are interconnected and form the most ancient part of the monastery. The Zelāmā which appears to be a later addition, now affords entrance to the Du-wang and Gon-khang. The monastery belongs to the Ge-luk-pas or 'yellow hat' sect.

#### *1. Du-wang*

Entered from the hall known as Zelāmā and facing east, one enters a dark corridor known as *gotha*, the walls of which are covered with paintings of miniature Buddha figures. The main *gompha* beyond the corridor has two rows of octagonal wooden pillars, four in each row, having carved stone bases of inverted lotus. The top of each pillar has a carving of *pūrṇa-ghata* supporting a *taranga* capital. Besides these





*Plate XVII. Tabo monastery: close up of the gamphas*

pillars, a few more round pillars have been added in later times to support the falling roof. At the end of the hall is the sanctum with a circumambulatory path. It contains an image of Buddha kept on a lion-throne. A four-faced image of Vairochana is kept on a high seat in front of a wooden platform erected against the last set of pillars. The hall measures 63' × 34' (19·2 × 10·36 m.) approximately.

*Paintings and sculptures on the wall*

The wall surface is divided into two parts by a row of thirty-two projecting stucco figures at a height of about 6 feet (1·82 m.) each held in position by a peg driven in the wall from the body of the sculpture. The sculptures represent male and female deities each with a tiara and seated on a lotus seat. These fine sculptures form the divinities of the *Vajradhātumandala*, the central divinity of which is Vairochana set on

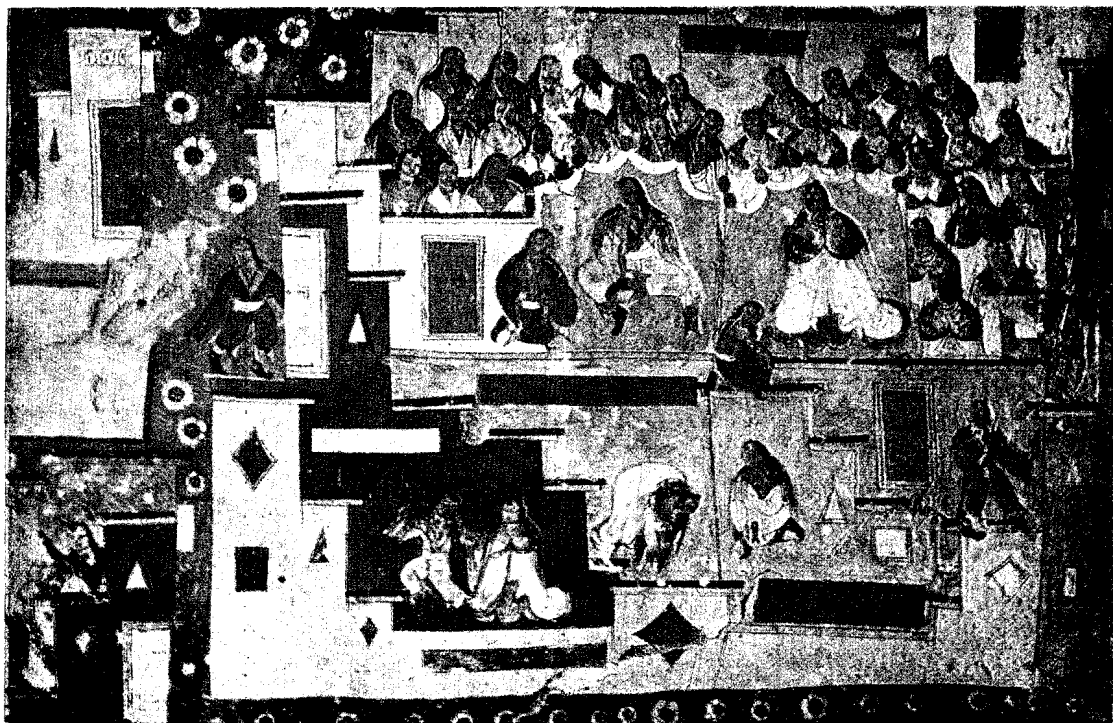


Plate XVIII. *Tabo, Du-wang : unidentified scene from the story of Nor-Sang*



Plate XIX. *Tabo, Du-wang : unidentified scene from the story of Nor-Sang with label inscriptions*



the altar and already referred to above. Set against the wall are four Buddhas of direction each of them flanked by Bodhisattvas, two to the left and two to the right. Among the divinities are eight divinities: Vajra-gaiety, Vajra-garland, Vajra-song, Vajra-dance, Vajra-perfume, Vajra-flower, Vajra-lamp and Vajra-incense. The four fierce male divinities are: Vajrāṅkuśa (Vajra-hook) Vajra pāśa (Vajra-noose), Vajrasphoṭa (Vajra-burst), Vajrāveśa (Vajra-fury). The portion above the sculptures is covered by the paintings of large and small Buddha and Bodhisattva figures. The portion has not suffered much, but could not be photographed for want of light. The lower portion has suffered the most, but a continuous Jātaka story is depicted on the southern wall surface while the northern wall depicts the story of Buddha from his birth to *parinirvāṇa*, though portions have subsequently been retouched extensively. Some of the renovation work has been done by a competent renovator who has understood his limitations and executed only the line-work. While in recent times, all damaged portions have been indifferently plastered and covered over with incongruous colour patches showing trees in blue and green. Among the paintings on the southern wall, it was possible to identify a scene from the *Vessantara Jātaka*, where the children of Vessantara are delivered to Vessantara's father by the greedy Brahmin Jūjaka. The other paintings deal with the story of a benevolent young prince Nor-Sang and the different scenes yet remain to be identified with the help of the label inscriptions appearing at several places (plates XVIII-XX).

The wall surface of the *pradakṣhiṇā-patha* is employed for the depiction of the theme of the Thousand Buddhas.

Among the paintings depicting the story of Buddha on the northern wall, the procession showing Māyā in a chariot proceeding to Kapilavastu is remarkable for its vigour and rich imagery (plate XXI). The conception of Māyā and the birth of Buddha are also very beautifully depicted. The panel on north-east corner showing Buddha addressing the assembly of Śākyas is also remarkable. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of Buddha is depicted on the wall facing west.

The paintings on the walls of this hall are by far the most ancient at Taṭo (*circa* eleventh century A.D.) and stylistically owe their inspiration to the classical tradition practised in India, though it has developed its regional peculiarities. We have already seen that the Tibetans not only invited religious teachers from India but craftsmen who transmitted the Indian tradition of painting to this region. The recent excavation of the Vikramśilā site has also brought to light murals and this university played an important role in the spread of Buddhism in Tibet.

## 2. *The Zelāmā*

The structure, which is square on plan, is centrally supported by four pillars with central opening in the roof for the light. The paintings on

the walls are very recent, having been executed by the Head Lama, Sanden Dorje, about five years ago. The old painting of Zelāmā on the wall facing east at the north-western corner has also been retouched by him. The room has as such lost much of its importance.

### 3. *The Gon-khang*

A small room used for *tana mana* (religious worship) contains a wooden stool on which are kept a few images made of *sattu*, the main object of worship being Kali whose wooden image is kept on the pedestal.

### *The paintings on the walls*

The paintings on the western wall consist of three figures of Kāla on horse-back. Brandishing a sword, he rides a horse and wears a skull-bedecked head-dress and a flowing costume. Below are depicted eight auspicious symbols and miniature Bodhisattva figures above and along the sides.

### 4. *The Chambā Chibo*

It is called Chambā Chibo on account of the large (*chambā* image of Buddha in *pralambapāda* in the sanctum sanctorum. Facing east, the hall has a small portico with an ornate wooden door-frame with Goṇeśa on the *lalāṭa-bimba*. Above the *lalāṭa-bimba* are seven wooden panels in relief of which the alternate ones contain figures of Buddha, while the other four are standing figures in *tribhaṅga*, the exact identification of which is not possible in their present damaged condition. Above the central panel is carved a *kinnara* couple while on the door jambs is carved a beautiful floral pattern and a row of standing Buddhas on either side. At present only six figures can be made out, but there may be a few more in the portions now buried in the ground. The wooden door-frame is a work of artistic execution and may compare with the wooden temples of Chamba. It is not unlikely that the workmen came from the Chamba region.

The main hall, together with the sanctum containing the large image of Buddha in the *Dharamchakra-pravartana-mudrā* has a very high ceiling (about 6 metres). The ceiling is supported by six pillars, three in each row all resting on sculptured stone pedestals carved with tiger and elephant figures. The huge figure of Buddha has undergone repairs in recent years when the surface was painted in red and yellow colours. The paintings on the walls in the sanctum sanctorum except a portion on the northern wall containing old paintings have been retouched and varnished. The paintings in the main hall are of a later period and may hardly be 100 years old. The old paintings referred to above deserve to be cleaned and preserved.



Plate XX. *Tabo, Du-wang : scene from the story of  
Nor-Sang depicting tortures in the hell*



The ceiling was also painted with geometric designs of which traces are still extant.

#### 5. *Dom-lang*

Provided with an ornate wooden door-frame having Buddha in *dharmachakra pravartana-mudrā* on the *lalātabimba*, the Dom-lang shrine has a narrow entrance passage leading to a more or less square hall centrally supported by one tall wooden pillar set on a stone pedestal.

The paintings on the walls are of special note on account of the unified compositions. The paintings belong to the last period of Gu-ge style. On the back wall is a large-sized figure of Buddha in *bhūmiśparśa-mudrā* holding a begging bowl in one hand with an attendant on either side holding a begging bowl. The figure of standing Bodhisattvas, Mañjuśrī and Maitreya, with drapery distinctive on account of decorative design are painted on either side of the central composition.

The side walls have the compositions separated by miniature figures of which one large-sized figure composition with the principal figure of Vairocana having four heads in *dhyāna-mudrā* attracts attention on account of delicate line-work. The paintings have suffered damage by profuse leakage of water from the roof but can be retrieved by chemical treatment and structural conservation. The wooden ceiling is painted with floral figures, celestials with scarfs in hand and animal figures.

#### 6. *Lang Chedbo*

This oblong hall with a sanctum of slightly smaller width is noteworthy on account of the beautifully decorated ceiling supported by brackets resting on the six octagonal pillars, three on each row. The ceiling decoration on the wooden planks set between the rafters is a distinctive feature of this *gompha*. Celestial beings, lotus medallions, floral patterns, religious symbols like the *śaṅkha*, geometrical patterns, make the ceiling extremely variegated and colourful.

Paintings on the walls are of large size like those in Dom-lang. The central figure on the back wall of the sanctum has been redone in recent years. But the figures on the side walls of the hall are older though later than the earliest paintings in the Du-wang. The paintings usually depict Buddha in various *mudrās* with attendant figures in frontal poses.

#### 7. *Ser-lang*

Provided with a porch and a plain wooden door which may be a later addition, the rectangular hall has a definite indication of a sanctum. The hall is supported by four pillars square in section and has a ceiling



equally colourful like that of Lang-chedbo. The paintings on the wall are similarly large-sized and, therefore, suggest that the *gomphas* 6 and 7 belong to the same period. The paintings here, however, are untouched by later renovations and they are fringed at the lower end by running *vajra* pattern and decorative writings.

In the back wall the central figure is a Buddha in *bhūmiśparśa-mudrā*, with attendant figures on either side. On the proper left of the figure is a Bodhisattva Maitreya carrying sword and a book on lotus. The most distinguishing feature of this figure is the very intricate design on the garment worn by it. The paintings are remarkable for the minute workmanship of drapery and ornamentation.

The other walls also have large-sized compositions. In this hall masks are kept on stools and tied to the pillars. There appears to be some special ritual significance for such display of masks in this *gompha*.

#### 8. *Chil-kang*

Known as Chil-kang or the middle *gompha*, this small hall is remarkable for a different pattern of paintings of ritualistic intent. Here, for the first time, we come across *maṇḍalas* (plate XXII) the worship of which on *thangkas* gained currency in later times.

The southern wall depicts a *maṇḍala* with Buddha in *dharma-chakra-pravartana-mudrā* in a circle in the centre with eight small Bodhisattva figures around him. Outside the circle and set within a rectangle are twenty-four figures of Bodhisattvas, six in each corner. The rectangle is again circumscribed by a circle with three figures of Bodhisattvas in the outer quadrant. Correspondingly, there is another *maṇḍala* on the northern wall with nine figures in a circle and twenty-eight figures in the enclosing square which is again set within a circle at the four ends of which two deer with *dharma-chakra* are painted suggesting the first sermon of Buddha in the deer park at Banaras. The back wall also has a large *maṇḍala* set around a three-faced deity enclosed in a circle.

The *gompha* is considered to be one of the earliest structures and is interesting as it provides an idea of the prevalent mode of worship.

The ceiling is decorated with variegated paintings of birds, animals and floral patterns etc.

#### 9. *Lankar Chung*

Used for the initiation of nuns, this small oblong hall, centrally supported by four round wooden pillars, faces east and has a low wooden entrance. The paintings on the walls are described below:



Plate XXI. *Tabo, Du-wang : scene depicting royal procession and the birth of Buddha in Lumbini grove*



Plate XXII. *Tabo, Chil-kang : Buddhist mandala*



### *Western wall*

On this wall is depicted a panel showing Buddha figure on lotus in *bhūmiśparśa mudrā*. To the proper left is seated Bodhisattva Maitreya carrying a sword and book on lotus on either side.

On the southern wall are also three principal large-sized figures with rows of miniature figures on sides. Of the two rows of figures, seven in each row, one set has been completely damaged by leakage of water.

On the walls looking west on either side of the entrance are figures of Kālī wearing a skull-bedecked *mukuta*.

### *Bronze images and other objects at Tabo*

The monastery has a small but an interesting collection of bronze images showing Buddha seated in *vajrāsana* with hands in *bhūmiśparśa mudrā*. In one case, he also holds the *vajra* in his left hand. There is also an image of Vajrasattva holding a *vajra* near the heart. The images are of both Indian and Nepalese origin.

The collection of masks used in the performance of the *Chamb* dance is equally interesting.

### *The hillside monastery at Tabo*

The remains of a deserted and dilapidated monastic establishment are noticeable on the mountain side about two furlongs to the north of the Tabo monastery and about 200 feet (60·96 m.) above the ground level. This monastery was used in winter by the Lamas of the lower monastery, but in view of its extremely bad state of preservation, it now serves only the purpose of a fair held in the winter and lasting for a week or so. The monastery consists of caves partly excavated in the conglomerate formation and partly built in rubble masonry.

Of the many *gomphas*, the one that is in a tolerably good state of preservation is known as Du-wang. It is partly rock-cut and partly structural with ancillary structures forming a kitchen (*chand-sa*) store (*schoit*) and latrine (*cheit*). The central room of Du-wang contains a number of paintings of fairly good workmanship. They are, however, later than the paintings in the Du-wang *gompha* of the lower group. The figure of an eleven-headed Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara on the western wall is worthy of mention.

Besides Du-wang, there are six rudely-cut caves on the eastern side, either circular or oval in plan. The façades of these caves are almost completely fallen and the cells are full of débris. These caves are known as *Shenoya-phoo* (eastern side residential rooms). In the western half, there are also about nine cells in a very damaged condition including quarters for the head Lama. The monastery group on the hillside also

deserves protection especially the Du-wang *gompha* which contains interesting paintings.

### *The technique of paintings*

The paintings have been executed in tempera on mud plaster. Generally, the mud-wall serves as the 'carrier'. We came to know from the local Lamas that the binding medium was glue derived from the sheep-skin. In most cases, the mud plaster was found and reinforced with bits of straw, husk and other fibrous material. The plaster is powdery and friable. On the plastered surface is a very thin coat of white ground and has been laid directly over the mud plaster after smoothening the prime coat of plaster. It appears that lime and clay were used for giving this white wash. The mud plaster is being examined in the Survey's laboratory to determine the contents and also to find out the contents of the material of which the pigments were made.

The oldest paintings at Tabo are contained in the Du-wang monastery and can be attributed to the tenth-eleventh century A.D. The paintings in the Gong Khang, where angry deities are represented, belong to the fifteenth-sixteenth century A.D. and those of Ser Khang to a still later period. The paintings in Chilkang belong to a class by themselves and contain *mandalas*, the worship of which gained importance in the middle period. It will thus be seen that the Tabo paintings present a stylistic amalgam where the Kashmir style and the Pāla style (of illustrated manuscripts) have been fused together with Tibetan influence. All these together form what we may call the Gu-ge style.

The paintings have another importance in the matter of study of costumes and the way of life in the bygone centuries and would call for a detailed study. □



