
RESEARCH PAPER

Brahmi Inscriptions from Kondane Caves

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The aim of the paper is to analyze the Brahmi inscriptions engraved at Kondane caves. All the previous research works have recorded and studied only one donation that was made by Balaka, a disciple of Kanha. Apart from this inscription, three more inscriptions have been noted. In our quest to search them we could locate only one in situ that has been photo documented and analyzed.

Keywords: Kondane; Rock Cut Caves; Brahmi Inscriptions

Introduction

From the early Buddhist narratives, we learn that Buddhism has made inroads in western India during the lifetime of the Buddha.

The Supparaka Jataka narrates a story of Supparaka-Kumara, a bodhisattva born to a mariner family from Bhugukaccha or Baroch. (Speyer 2010: 172–185).

Three narratives from the Theragatha refer to Punna, Isidinna and Vaddha from western India. Punna was the son of a wealthy merchant Bhava from Shurparaka who travelled to Shravasti where he met the Buddha. After being initiated as a monk he returned to Sronanaparanta where he successfully converted large number of men and women. (Joel Tatelman: Unpublished Thesis, 1988) Isidinna, a Thera was a son of a Sethi from Sronaaparanta. Having heard the Buddha preach, he became a Sotāpanna. Vaddha belonged to a Gahapatikula or householder's family from Broach. He along with his mother joined the sangha.

Mention also be made of Bavari, was a royal priest of the King of Kosala. He later became an anchorite and set up an ashrama in the Ashmaka country identified in the present Godavari Basin. His sixteen disciples met the Buddha and sought answers to various philosophical questions. Pingiliya, his nephew returned and recounted all the acquired knowledge to Bavari. (Gokhale 1972: 231)

However, it was during the reign of Emperor Ashoka in 3rd BCE that Buddhism emerged as a distinct religion with great potentialities for expansion. A decision was taken in the third Buddhist Council presided over by Mogaliputta Tissa. Per which monks were sent far and wide to spread the word of Dhamma. A Yavana called Yona Dharmarakshita was then sent to Aparanta where he is

said to have successfully converted many people including women and nobles to Buddhism. (Mahavamsa: Ch XII)

- Along with these literary evidences, the fragments of Rock Edicts 8 (Indraji 1882: 10–16) & 9 (Sircar 1957: 5–6) of Emperor Ashoka have been discovered at Sopara. These literary and epigraphic evidences prove that Buddhism had made its definite inroads in western India by 3rd BCE.

Rise of Rock Cut Caves in Western Deccan

Early Buddhist missionaries must have gravitated to the niches in Sahyadri mountains to suit the needs of their ideas of asceticism and the monastic life. By 1st century BCE, Hippalus, a Greek navigator discovered the monsoon winds, that concurred with the rise of Satavahana power in Deccan. A flourishing trade utilizing the sea routes with the western world ensued thereafter. Emergence of the monasteries on the ancient trade routes was not a mere coincidence. Many traders financially supported these establishments which is evident by the donative inscriptions at these rock hewn caves. In fact, the rock cut monasteries became a rich repository of such donations recording the donations of the royals, feudals, monks, nuns and lay devotees.

Locating Kondane Caves

Kondane Caves (**Figure 1**) are situated at the base of Rajmachi hill fort overlooking the Ulhas river in the Karjat taluqa of Raigad District. (Lat. 18° 51'N, Long. 73° 23') These caves were first noticed by Vishnu Shastri around 1830 AD and Mr. Law, the collector of Thane who visited the caves soon after. (JBRRAS 1850: 46–47 and Fergusson, Burgess 1969: 220)

The caves are placed along the Bhore Ghat, an important trade route connecting the hinterland ports like Kalyan-Sopara and ancient inland towns like Ter, Junnar and Paithan. There are seven west facing lenas and a chaityagraha at Kondane. (Qureshi 2010: 274–278)

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Figure 1: Kondane Caves.

Dating of the Caves

Kondane is one of the earliest monastery hewn out of the Sahyadri ranges in Western India. Regarding the date of the Kondane Caves, Fergusson and Burgess have marked them as contemporary with the Bhaje Caves. (Fergusson and Burgess 1969: 220) This establishment is untampered by any architectural activities of later Mahayana period.

Locating the inscriptions at Kondane

Unlike other contemporary rock hewn caves at Bhaje, Karle and Bedse, no inscriptions are visible inside the chaitya griha. The pillars and the stupa are in dilapidated condition that probably deprived us of the valuable information.

As per the information provided by the Archaeological Survey of India (<http://asimumbaicircle.com>), there are total three short Brahmi-Prakrit inscriptions engraved on the outer façade of the chaityagriha. Out of which only one finds mentioned in all the pervious important documentations. (JBBRAS 1850: 46–47, Epigraphia Indica-Vol-X, Appendix no. 1071, Fergusson and Burgess 1969: 222 and Gupchup 1963: 174–184) Burgess and Indrajī have neither discussed Kondane Caves nor the inscriptions therein in their work. (Burgess Indrajī) Only S. Nagaraju

has recorded later two inscriptions and marked them as 'unpublished'. (Nagaraju 1981: 339) Neither an estampage nor an eye copy of these inscriptions was made available by any so far.

Dikshit, M G has noted fourth inscription in his unpublished thesis. He reads it as 'Hamma of (i.e. donated by) Prakara.' Thereby identifying the Kondane establishment of a Hammiya type. (Dutta 2015: 96) However this inscription too could not be located by us in situ.

First Inscription

As seen in the photograph (**Figure 2**) first inscription records donation by Balaka, the disciple of Kanha (Krishna). The details of which are as under

Kanhasa antevāsina balakena katam

Dr. Kern has translated it as 'made by Balakaken, the pupil of Kanha (Krishna)'. (Fergusson and Burgess 1969: 221) Lüders has translated it as 'made by Baluka (Balaka), the pupil (antevasin) of Kanha (Krishna)'. (Epigraphia Indica-Vol-X, Appendix no. 1071) The inscription is engraved over the left shoulder of the intricately carved fragmentary sculpture of a yaksha. Probably the sculpture was donated by Balaka. However, this is not a conclusive evidence.



Figure 2: Inscription No 1 Donation by Balaka.

A donative inscription from Nashik engraved above the image of a yaksha in cave no. 18 may be mentioned here. (Figure 3)

*.....bena ch...ni.....yava Nadasiriyava cha veika yakho
ch karita*

(Epigraphia Indica-Vol-X, no.1143 and Epigraphia Indica-Vol-VIII, no. 21: 93) This fragmentary inscription records donation of a Yakha (yaksha) and Vedika by Nadasiriya. This inscription suggests that figures of yaksha (Deshpande 2010: 91–104) were donated at the rock hewn caves of western India.

Paleography of the inscription

The earliest recorded inscription from coastal Maharashtra is the fragmentary edicts No. 8 & 9 at Sopara of Emperor Ashoka that dates to 3 BCE. The earliest inscription of the Satavahana dynasty, the successors of the Mauryas in western India belongs to the reign of second Satavahana King Kanha. (Krishna)

This inscription reads

*Sadavahan kule rajini Nashiken
Samanen mahamaten len karita*

(Epigraphia Indica-X: Luder's List No.1144)

A comparison with these two inscriptions will allow us to arrive at a plausible date of the first inscription.

All the letters in this inscription are well in conformity with its Sopara counterpart except the letter 'va' which is seen with a rounded shape with small vertical line on top. Similar type of rounded 'va' is seen in the Nashik inscription of King Kanha.

However, in this inscription it has taken triangular shape suggesting its early Satavahana period origin in conformity with the dating of the architecture.

Second Inscription

As seen in the photograph (Figure 4) the second inscription is engraved on the lowermost cornice of the overhanging cave. This Prakrit Brahmi inscription is read in the flyer uploaded at the website of the Archaeological Survey of India (Western Circle) (<http://asimumbaicircle.com>) as,

*Sidham barakasa dhammayakhasa
Kanchikaputasa po(thira?)*

The inscription is neither translated in the flyer nor by S. Nagaraju who mentions it as unpublished. Nagaraju has retained same reading of this inscription. (Nagaraju 1981: 339) Nagaraju also suggests the reading of the last word as 'pavado'.

A discrepancy is observed in the reading after evaluating the inscription at Kondane. We read the inscription as



Figure 3: Yaksha at Nashik



Figure 4: Inscription No 2 Donation by Hemayaksha

sidham (Soloman 1998: 67) *barakas ha(dha?)maya(kh)sa kuchikaputasa pathe*

'Ha(dha?)mayaksha, resident of Barakasa, son of Kuchika donated at the rear side'

As seen in the photograph (**Figure 5**), this inscription is positioned high above on the façade of the main chaityagriha. The letters of the inscription are not as fine and deeply carved as that of the earlier. Usually the donative inscriptions are inscribed on the objects donated. Considering the high position of this inscription, no immediate object that could have been possibly donated by Ha(dha)mayaksha there. However, a donative inscription from Karle gives us a clue. Harfaran, a resident of Abulama donated a mandapa (Vihara) of nine cells at Karle caves during the 24th regnal year of Satavahana King Vasithiputra Pulumavi. The last line of the grant records the donation by the mother of Buddharakshita behind this cave.

Budharakhitasa matu deyadhamma patho ano (Mirashi 1981: 55–57)

'There is another pious gift of the mother of Buddharakshita behind (this cave)'. V. V. Mirashi suggests that '..... if 'patho' is amended into 'pathe' (prushthe), the

intended meaning may be 'there is another (mandapa) behind (this)'. (Mirashi 1981: 55–57)

As seen in the photograph (**Figure 6**), here at Kondane too is a vihara behind the façade where the present inscription is engraved. If the above explanation is accepted, then the vihara was possibly donated by Ha(dha)mayaksha.

Paleography of the Inscription

As seen in the earlier inscription, this inscription too shows all the characteristics of the early Satavahana characters. Its posterity to the Ashoka's edicts of the 3rd BCE is marked by the inverted 'dha' shown as \square .

However, the letter 'ma' still shows the rounded features of the Ashokan type.

The letter 'ma' has taken a clear triangular shape in the Nashik inscription of the reign of King Kanha (Krishna). Letter 'ma' has retained its rounded shape in the Naneghat Inscription of Satavahana queen Naganika that immediately succeeds the Nashik inscription of King Krishna. It must be noted that the letter 'dha' is of inverted type (\square) in Naneghat inscription. Thus, this inscription finds more similarities with the Naneghat inscription.



Figure 5: Location of the Newly Discovered Inscription



Figure 6: Location of the Vihara at Kondane.

Third Inscription

As per the records of Archaeological Survey of India, the third inscription is located on the lowermost cornice of the overhanging projection of the façade decorated with chaitya arches. (<http://asimumbaicircle.com>) and reads as follows:

Kanchikaputasa deyadhama

Nagaraju, S also has retained the same reading and marked this inscription as unpublished. (Nagaraju 1981: 339)

It can be translated as the donation by the son of Kanchika. This brief inscription suggests that Ha(dha) mayaksha made another donation at Kondane, though his name is not mentioned in the inscription.

In spite of our vigorous search we could not find this inscription. In the absence of any physical record it is difficult to ascertain the nature of this donation or the actual reading.

Conclusion

We have been successfully able to trace the second donative inscription from Kondane. The revised reading is also provided in the paper. Despite a vigorous search, the third and the fourth inscriptions as recorded in the flyer and by Dikshit, M G could not be traced.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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