

Buddhist Rock-Cut Caves of Bhaṇḍārā, District Pune: A Critical Study

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There are many important Buddhist rock-cut cave groups on the Mumbai-Pune route. These caves are located as the last point towards Pune in this row. Until now only the major cave sites with decoration and sculptural embellishment, like Bhaja, Bedsa, Karla, Kondane, Kanheri and Kondivate were studied with a major attention by scholars like Burgess and Fergusson. The plainer cave sites like Shelarwadi, Bhaṇḍārā, Ambivale, etc. were given less attention. In fact, Bhaṇḍārā (also known as Induri) was not even cursorily mentioned in the studies carried out on this subject.



Fig.1: Bhaṇḍārā Caves General View

Hence, a thorough documentation programme of this very small group of caves was undertaken (Figs.1-2).

The Buddhist caves at Bhaṇḍārā are also known as the caves at Induri as one of the approaches to these caves is from this town. Located 3 km to the west of the town of Dehu, these caves are excavated in the Western slope of the hill, generally known as the

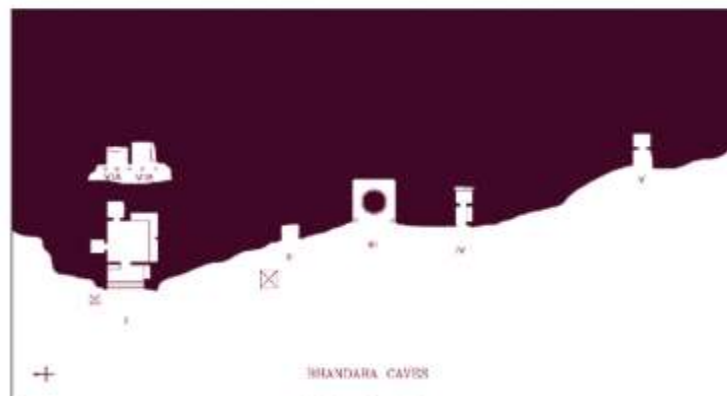


Fig.2: Site Plan

Bhaṇḍārā Doṅgara. According to various legends, the hill of Bhaṇḍārā was used by Tukārāma, a very important saint of the 17th century Maharashtra, for meditation. He used to stay at Dehu and meditate in one of the caves. He himself was a devotee of the *Bhāgavata* cult and that of Lord Viṭṭhala and Rakhumābāī. Hence, for the devotees of Saint Tukārāma this is a pilgrim place. Recently, a new temple containing a life-size image of Saint Tukārāma was constructed at the top of the hill. A motorable road has been created and the vehicles can go to the top of the hill. Thus, this hill has become a very popular religious tourism destination in the recent past. The same hill contains three finished and four unfinished caves in the western face of the hill. One of the finished caves is a *vihāra* (Cave-I) with two cells and a long bench running in the back and right walls of the hall. In the medieval times, images of Lord Viṭṭhala and Goddess Rakhumāī were installed there and the cave was converted into a shrine. Presently, young Vārakarī mendicants residing in this cave, go for alms in the nearby residential area and look after the maintenance of the cave. The mouths of the water cisterns in front of the caves have been covered with the concrete construction and the water is used by them for their daily purposes. Most of the visitors who go to this place ascend hill from the eastern side and hence are not aware of the existence of the caves on the western side.

The caves at Bhaṇḍārā are neither known for the architectural and sculptural marvels, nor for the inscriptional wealth as not a single inscription has been reported from this seemingly unimpressive site. Still they stand alone preserving their own importance for the study of the Buddhist rock-cut architecture and the various ideological issues in the development of the religion in Western India.

When the caves were brought to the notice of the scholarly world for the first time by R.L. Bhide (IAR 1957-58: 67) they were called as the caves in Induri. After this sole publication there is not a single published note on this cave site. The main focus of the visitors to this place is the worship of the images of Lord Viṭṭhala and Goddess Rakhumāī and they are called as *Viṭhobā Rakhumāīcī Leṇī* by the local devotees. Despite the very obvious presence of a huge *stūpa* in the complex, not many people are aware of its Buddhist association. Hence, there is absolutely no serious publication available on this site.

Description of the Caves at Bhaṇḍārā

Almost all the caves face the west direction.

Cave-I : This is the largest cave in this complex, converted into the temple of Lord Viṭṭhala and Goddess Rakhumābāi. At present it consists of

two cells and a long bench in the hall (Figs.3,3a,3b). After climbing a flight of few steps one enters the cave, which has a small veranda of 3.17 m width and 2.5 m depth. It contains one bench in the left back wall and the other in the right wall. As one enters the hall, a small cell is seen in the left wall. The hall is 5 m square with many alterations made in the later period. The



Fig.3: Cave-I – Facade of the Cave

height of the hall is 2.21 m. There are two cells opening into the hall. One in the left wall is 2.3 m square and another 1.90 m square is excavated in the back wall of the hall. Both the cells have no bench inside. The sockets on the doorframe indicate that a wooden door was fixed there. The doorframes of both the cells



Fig.3a: Cave-I – Interior of the Cave with images of Viṭṭhala and Rakhumāi



Fig.3b: Cave-I – Interior Right Wall

are devoid of any decoration having holes in the walls for the wooden post known as *valagni*.

The central hall of this cave has also got an 'L' shaped bench running along the back and right walls. There are remains to indicate that the original arrangement of the back wall was changed and a new shrine of the Lord Viṭṭhala and Goddess Rakhumābāī was constructed. A small step was added to the entrance of the cell in the back wall. Even in the right wall the bench continues but there are indications suggesting that the partition wall between two was broken. The benches today show many niches in them which are used by the people to keep their objects in them. It is difficult to say that these niches formed the part of the original plan of the cave or were made later on. The cave is painted by the residents as per their will and devotees come and often visit this cave which is a *vihāra*-cum-shrine.

There is a cistern filled with water in the courtyard of this cave. The openings of this and the other cistern are raised from the ground by constructing a concrete edge. The date 10th June 2003 is also carved in the concrete. The water of cistern is utilized by the residents of the cave for their daily chores.

Cave-II : This is a small cave of 1.2 m width and 0.75 m depth with a squarish outline (Fig.4). There is no trace of bench or a veranda in the present unfinished cave. It was not inhabited, it could have provided some sort of shelter to one or maximum two monks at a time. There is a small but deep water cistern in front of the cave.



Fig.4: Cave-II – Front View

Cave-III : This is the only *caityagrha* at Bhaṇḍārā in square shape on plan. In a small hall with broken ceiling and dome, a *stūpa* is situated with circumambulation (Fig.5). It is 2.44 m in height and 1.35 m in diameter. The centre of the *stūpa* is decorated with a rail pattern. The top portion is now missing, which could have *harmikā* and *chatrāvalī* (Fig.5a).



Fig.5: Cave-III – Stūpa



Fig.5a: Cave-III – Mutilated Top of the Stūpa

The surrounding walls of this small *caityagrha* have sockets at the level of the rail pattern suggesting the support that was provided by some wooden attachments. However, it is very difficult to tell whether the roof was vaulted or plain. Considering the square plan of the *caityagrha*, it can be placed in the late Hīnayāna phase and one can even conjecture a flat roof over the *stūpa*. Unfortunately, all the traces of the original roof have vanished today and the *stūpa* faces the sky. The similarity with the *stūpa* at Mahad (Cave XV) is remarkable. Hence, the *caityagrha* can be roughly dated to c. 2nd century CE.

Cave-IV : This is a modest excavation at the site with a single celled *vihāra* having a 0.90 m deep veranda at the front. The veranda has a small benched recess in the right wall. It leads one to the cell inside through the doorway. The doorframe is partially broken (Fig.6). The cell is 5' square and contains a rock-cut bench in the back wall of the cave.



Fig.6: Cave-IV – Front View



Fig.6a: Cave-IV – Interior – Bench with the Chamber

The right side of the bench is cut into a niche (0.30 m l x 0.43 m b x 0.02 m d) making it a secret niche in the bench (Fig.6a). Similar niches in the benches are observed in the *vihāras* at Bedsa, Kuda, etc. They were made probably to keep the valuables and hide them by covering the niche by a wooden plank. It is very interesting to see such a bench with a secret chamber in one of the caves at Bhaṇḍārā. It can also be conjectured that the caves were frequently visited by the traders and they probably kept some of their valuables with these monks. There could be many more uses of these niches made in ancient times but it is

difficult to say exactly what the need was, of the monks who were not supposed to have any possession with them.

Cave-V : This is an unfinished cave in the group of caves at Bhaṇḍārā. It is almost similar on plan like Cave-IV except the rock-cut bench in the veranda and inside the cell (Fig.7). This is a modest excavation but the rock chosen is full of joints and cracks. That is why there is no bench inside the cell. A huge crack



Fig.7: Cave-V – Front View



Fig.7a: Cave-V – Interior – Cracks in the Wall

is also seen in one of the corners inside the cell (Fig.7a). The doorway leading into the cave also shows a huge crack. The cell is almost 1.80 m square. In fact, the veranda is also almost of the same size.

Caves VIA and VIB : It is interesting to see that the cave excavation activity at Bhaṇḍārā continued even at a higher level. There is a flat portion of the hill on the upper levels of Cave-I, where two rooms were excavated. Both the caves had rock-cut benches inside for the monks. Unfortunately, the facade of the cave and some portion of the roof has fallen down. What remains today is actually the interior of the caves and that too partially broken (Fig.8).

Cave-VIA has a rock-cut bench in the back wall. It has a wide open entrance due to the broken facade. The cave is almost 2.74 m wide and 1.22 m deep. The height of the ceiling is around 2.26 m. As the facade was probably broken in those days, some kind of wooden attachment was added to it. The sockets of these wooden attachments can still be seen in the courtyard of this cave.

Cave-VIB is the adjacent cave and seems to have been a part of the same complex. This cave also has a wide open entrance due to the broken facade.

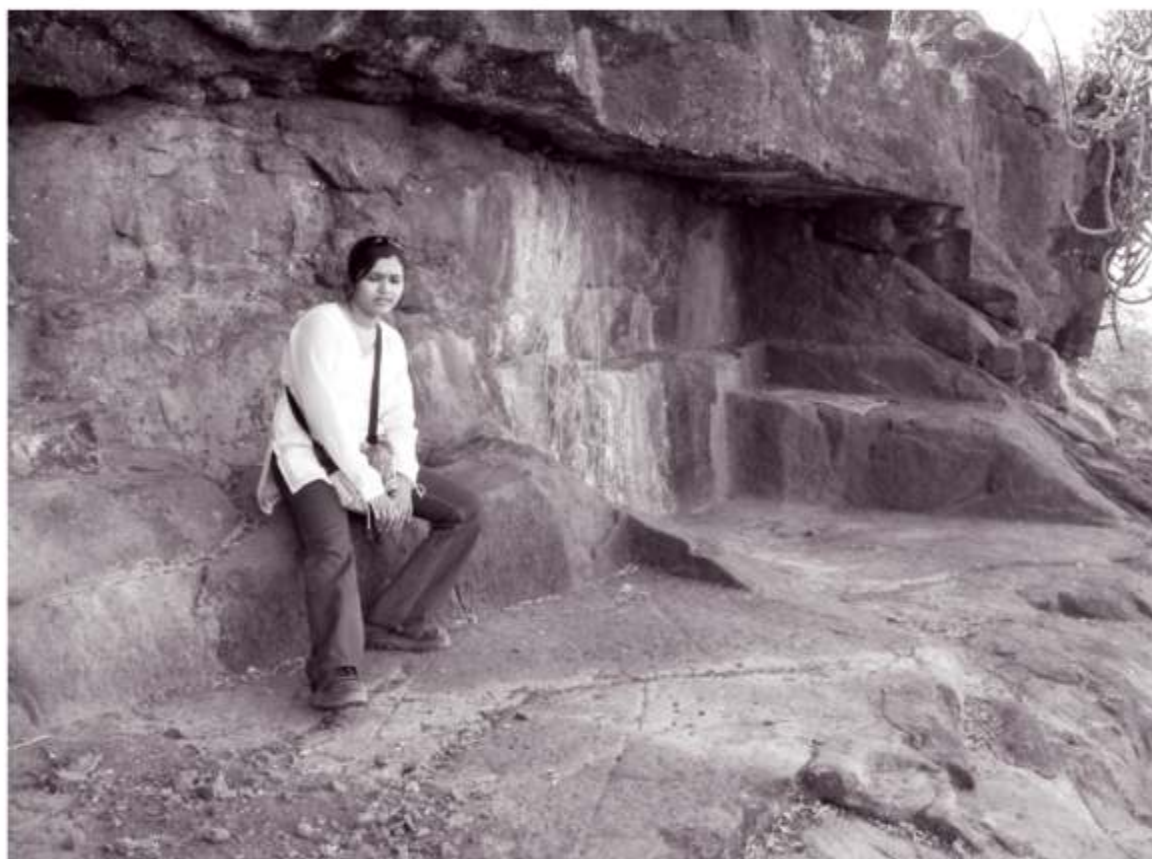


Fig.8: Cave VIB

There is a rock-cut bench in the right wall of the cave as one enters it. There is some projection of the rock in the back wall but its level does not match with the rock-cut bench. Hence, that projection should not be considered as being a rock-cut bench. Here also some kind of wooden attachments were made to the facade in ancient times as some sockets for such wooden attachments can be seen in the courtyard of this cave. This cave is also of similar shape and size like that of Cave VI A.

Considering the closeness of the cave sites and the existence of many small groups like Bedsa, Bhaṇḍārā, Shelarwadi, Patan, etc. one wonders about the need and function of these excavations. Even though there is no textual or inscriptional support and even the architectural evidence, still one is tempted to think in terms of the sectarian affiliation of these caves and the development of Buddhism in this part of the country. There is a possibility that a small number of monks following a particular sect chose to stay together and that is why a small site like Bhaṇḍārā was created. As there is no inscriptional evidence, all these remains as a conjecture. The very fact that such a small number of caves would have given shelter approximately to ten monks is quite significant. One would not be able to know the real reason for the creation of these caves with quite an impressive *stūpa*. The frequent visits by the laity and their need to worship the Buddha could be one of the pressing reasons. The explorations in the nearby region have not revealed the existence of ancient habitation sites as such. The main reason behind this could be the heavy rains, which have washed out the habitation remains. However, the medieval fort of Induri has some remains of the early medieval period in the form of Hero Stones and pot sherds. The river Indrayānī is a perennial water source and it is quite possible that in the early historic period it was inhabited by people who probably were devotees and frequent visitors of this *caityagṛha* at Bhaṇḍārā.

Chronology

The small single and double accommodations at this site fall under the so called late Hīnayāna period (Dhavalikar : 1984). The flat-roofed *caityagṛhas* in this phase are quadrangular on plan. In case of Bhaṇḍārā, the ceiling is broken but the plan is definitely rectangular. Similarly, the small *vihāras* is also a characteristic feature of this period. Hence, considering this the chronology of the site is determined. The *stūpa* was probably made in around 2nd century CE. The other caves also seem to have been made during more or less the same

period. It seems that the *caityagrha*, i.e. Cave-III was made first and immediately after that the main cave, i.e. Cave-I was excavated. Caves IV and V probably followed the excavation of Cave-I. Cave-II was made at a later date but looking at its size it cannot be considered as a residential cell. Cave-V has a very bad rock and hence we find that no bench could be carved there. Many joints are visible in the rock that gives way to the water percolating through it. Hence, the stratum of the rock, in which all the caves were excavated, was left and new caves were excavated in the strata at a higher level. Here Caves VI A & B were excavated, probably in around late 2nd century CE or early 3rd century CE.

Cave-IV has preserved an interesting record. This is of a secret chamber carved in the rock cut bed inside the cell. Such secret chambers are noticed in some of the caves at Bedsa, Kuda, etc. It has been conjectured that the chambers were used as safe deposit vaults in those days. The valuable objects were probably kept inside. It is also possible that the merchants donated the cash money and it was hidden inside such chambers. However, today it is very difficult to understand the exact function of such secret chambers. The very presence of such a secret chamber adds to the significance of this site.

Conclusion

Thus, the caves at Bhaṇḍārā probably enjoyed an important place among the followers of the region in ancient times. There is no evidence, seen today, of any inscription; hence, the patron of the site is not known. It is quite possible that the monastic organization itself had got these caves made for them from the funds received from the laity. Due to the absence of sufficient evidence it is very difficult to make any conjecture today. However, this does not lessen the importance of the site. In fact, the same place has become more important in the latter part of its history with the association of Saint Tukārāma. The very reason behind Tukārāma choosing this site could have been the antiquity of the place and the tradition of meditation. Further, if one goes back to the region, the land fort of Induri houses a temple of Goddess Kaḍjāī. D.D. Kosambi (1963:p.82) has discussed in detail about the trade routes, the local cult spots and the emergence of the Buddhist rock cut caves at these places. Considering the proximity of Induri, Goddess Kaḍjāī, the ancient trade route and the existence of the caves at Bhaṇḍārā, Saint Tukārāma's selection of site does not remain a riddle anymore. The continuity of habitation and the antiquity of the region had given a special sanctity to this place.

In this way, the cave site of Bhaṇḍārā is of immense value to study the development of Buddhism as a religion, its philosophy, art & architecture. The locational importance of this site should also be taken into consideration. The proximity of the famous Buddhist rock-cut sites in the nearby region and the trade route probably made this site arise and play their role in the life of the Buddhists of the early centuries of the Common Era. Even though the present scholarship is completely unaware of the then contemporary conditions, these caves stand as testimony to the vibrant life of the people living in the fertile valleys of the Indrayanai and Pavana rivers.

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