

Carle Cave Architecture

Dr. Dilip Kumar

Assistant Professor (Guest)

Dept. of Ancient Indian History & Archaeology,

Patna University, Patna

Paper – III, B.A. 2nd Year

Directly opposite Bhaja about 3 miles north of Malavali railway station is the village of Karla (lat. 18° 46'; long 73° 29' E). The high hills called Valuraks in ancient days near this village contains a dozen rock cut monasteries, a few rock cut cisterns and a Chaitya griha at a height of about 360 feet. Available evidences show to the existence of the establishment from the first century A.D. to about the seventh century A.D. There are a chain of about 16 caves executed out of the rocks and all of them face west. Cave 8 is the chaityagriha and one of the grandest and the largest of all the *chaityagrihas* of India.

It seems that the entire monastic complex of Karla was conceived as a single design. The caves like Kanheri caves, were caused from from the donations and support of a group of assorted individuals. This includes a prince of Maharathi family; monks and nuns and lay devotees including men and women. Persons practically from every strata of the society contributed towards the establishment of this complex, thus indicating its importance in the Buddhist world.



Chaityagriha at Karle

The inscription found here clearly speak of speak of 27 individuals from various places like Vejamati (Banavasi, north karna district, nearly 600 km south of Karla; Sopara (nearly 100 km northwest of Karla) and unidentified towns of *Umehanakata* and *Dhenukakata*. Most of the donors from *Dhenukakata* were Yavanas. The inscriptions of *Usavadata* and *Vasisthiputra Pulumavi* are dated in his 24th year of his reign (154 A.D.). The inscriptions thus give the ancient name of Karla as 'Veluraka'.

The *chaityagriha* (Cave 8) at Karla is the biggest of its type in the whole of India. The hall measures 37.87 m deep from door to back; 13.87 m wide and 14.02 high. A slight variation in dimensions is noticed when one goes from the front to rear, which might have been done intentionally to increase the depth of the hall. The *chaityagriha* consists of an apsidal hall with a front verandah. The apsidal hall is divided into a nave and two aisles by two rows of pillars which meet at the rear behind the stupa in a semicircle forming the apse. The pillars are executed with great ingenuity and vigor which reflect the sculptural art of the period. The pillar consists of a stepped pyramidal base surmounted by a pot, octagonal shaft over it, the capital of inverted flower vase member, a neck of closed amalaka and an inverted stepped pyramid over which lies a dossal decorated with animal sculptures with riders. The pillars behind the stupa which are seven in number are plain octagons without any decoration. Along the line of first pillar of the nave and parallel to the front wall, a transverse line of four pillars are also noticed. The roof of the aisles is flat, while the pillars of the nave support a simple architrave over which rises a barrel vaulted roof which ends in a semi dome over the stupa in the rear. This roof is fitted with the actual carved ribs and longitudinal rafters.

The object of worship is the stupa at the rear end of the *chaityagriha*. The stupa consists of a cylindrical drum rising in two stages. A hemispherical dome rises over the drum which supports a cubical *harmika* and a seven stepped inverted square pyramid over it. Over the pyramid placed a wooden chhatri with a shaft through a hole pierced into it. The *chaityagriha* is entered through a screen wall erected in front of the verandah, which in turn has three entrances, the central one opening into the nave and the other two, into the flanking aisles. The sidewalls of the verandah and inner face of the screen wall are extensively decorated with sculptures. The front wall of the verandah is also profusely decorated which is executed in two parts. The lower portion consists of a row of railing pattern and above which is six mithuna figures rising up to the level of lintels. The portion above the doorways is decorated with a series of miniature chaitya window imitating the huge chaitya window.

These miniature windows are connected through a *vedika* and a roll cornice. This pattern extends throughout the entire width of the façade of the hall. The huge chaitya window mentioned above provides good light source to light of stupa and the pillars of the grand

chaityagriha. The *chaityagriha* at Karla is also unique as it is one among the two *chaityagrihas* in western Deccan which has huge lion pillars in front, the other.

This pillar is one of the Ashokan type with a huge sixteen sided shaft rising over a platform. The shaft is surmounted by an inverted bell member followed by flat surface and inverted stepped pyramidal plates. Four adorsed lions command the top of this pillar. This pillar is located to the right of the *chaityagriha*. Similar pillar should have existed on its left, for which evidence is seen in the form of a short stump.

The centuries old Karla caves are the magnificent examples of Indian rock-cut architecture. Built from top to bottom in the form of a ladder, the early Karla caves do not depict the Buddha in his physical forms but rather in symbols. However, from the 7th century A.D. when the *Mahayana* became more popular with their liberal thoughts, the later Karla caves do present the Buddha in his physical form such as the Buddha preaching while seated on a lion-supported throne, along with magnificent carving on three elephants.