Conclusion

The preceding pages have attempted to reveal the importance and significance of the Western Indian Cave Inscriptions from the Buddhist point of view. Anything and every thing that is related to or that has significance in Buddhism is dealt with minutely. Once again, it must be admitted that the inscriptions, under consideration, are mostly short and all donative. Therefore, aspects of Buddhism are not reflected by the inscriptions in abundance. Nevertheless, a thorough scrutiny of the epigraphic records yields some of the most important and fundamental features of Buddhism.

The inscriptions reveal that the Buddhist settlements were not confined only to the rock-cut caves of Western India but also to other types of human settlements such as villages and towns. For example, Broach, Chaul, Kalyan, Paithan and Sopara were some of the towns which had a large number of Buddhist population including the monks and nuns. Though the Buddhist monasteries were scattered here and there in Western India, especially in the coastal regions, they were inter-linked by the then flourishing trade-routes and natural passes. Thus, no Buddhist settlement was left isolated or secluded.

Buddhism, in Western India, would not have achieved its greatness and glory if it had not received the royal patronage one century after the other. The royal patrons were, indeed, the backbone for the growth and spread of the faith in the region. The first political power to show a great favour to the religion was that of the Mauryan dynasty. The inscriptions of Asoka are a living testimony to it. Then came the Satavahana
dynasty, during whose rule (60 BC to 220 AD), Buddhism made its rapid growth and wide-spread establishments. Most of the rock-cut caves came into existence and were occupied during this period. Contemporary with the latter Satavahanas were the Western Kshatrapas under whose dominion also Buddhism found a favourable climate for its marked growth. The local rulers or feudal lords such as the Mahārathis and Mahābhbojas were also in favour of Buddhism. As time passed on, during the Mahāyāna phase, Buddhism found once again the royal supports from the Trikuṭakas, the Vakatakas, the Asmakas and the Silaharas. Besides these successive royal patronages, Buddhism received well-wishes and generous supports from the rich Yavanas who settled or came to Western India in pursuance of their trades.

Apart from the royal patronages and the Yavana supports, Buddhism also did receive and enjoy the embrace of the society. It was not the Buddhist believers alone that made constant supplies of all kinds to the Buddhist Sangha, but people from other religions as well. Analysis of names mentioned in the inscriptions shows that many of the donors were non-Buddhists.

Among the various donors were the ploughman, husbandmen, gardeners, corn-dealers, weavers, oil-pressers and bamboo workers from the agriculture department; bankers, caravan leaders, merchants and traders from the mercantile community; treasurers, writers, accountants and physicians from the high-ranking services; goldsmiths, jewellers, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, ironmongers, braziers, carpenters and potters from the craftsmen; and painters, dyers, perfumers, fishermen and even cart-pullers from the individualized professional groups. All these people,
representing the various categories of society, made their valuable contributions to the Buddhist Sangha for the accumulation of merit. Most of their gifts are still visible in their original forms as rock-cut monuments of Western India.

The inscriptions disclose that Buddhism, by permitting the women-folk to operate their own bhikshunisangha, in a way uplifted the position of women in the society. Women had not only the coveted privilege of entering the Order of nun, they also enjoyed other privileges such as making donation to the religion of their choice, studying and learning under the competent senior monks. It has been observed that the women-folk was actively engaged in making donations to the Buddhist Order in the Hinayāna phase, but mysteriously disappeared from the scene in the Mahāyāna phase.

The epigraphic records are truly the reflections of the people's religious devotion and the particular religion to which they were fervently dedicated. It has been found in the course of this work that the inscriptions are in perfect harmony with the Buddhist sacred texts. For instance, some of the most commonly used epithets of the Buddha in the scriptures are also mentioned in the inscriptions. They are: Bhagavāt, Lord; Jina, Conqueror; Muni, Sage; Muniraja, King of the sages; Munidranatha, Lord of the highest ascetic; Munir-muninam, the Ascetic of ascetics; Paramamuni, the greatest, first, chief Ascetic; Sakyamuni, the Ascetic of the Sakya clan, Sugata, One who walks well, happy and blest; Tathāgata, Being par excellence; Sarvatnya, Omniscient; Lokaguru, Teacher of the world; Sambuddha, One who has discovered the Truth; and Āryagana, Honourable teacher of the Arhats.

The Buddha is also praised as the Ascetic among the ascetics,
the Best among the good, a Store of marvels, the Extinguisher of the sins of the three worlds, One who completely attained to the three sciences and One in whom all the three virtues have grown up.

The inscriptions further reflect the belief of many Buddhas. While a Nasik inscription says that a gift was made in honour of all Buddhas, a Kanheri inscription makes a good wish to all the people by saying, "May all the living beings thereby become Buddhas". A number of the Kharosthi inscriptions of the Kushanas have also mentioned the phrases "for the worship of all Buddhas" and "in honour of all Buddhas" (CII, vol. II, 29, 49, 77, 87). Besides the above two references to the belief in many Buddhas, there is another concrete evidence obtained from Ajanta cave XXII where the list of eight Buddhas are given as follows: Vipassin, Sithi, Visvabhu, (Kakusanda), Kanakamuni, Kasyapa, Sakyamuni and Maitreya. The two famous jātakas, viz., Kshantivadi and King Sibi are also mentioned in the inscriptions.

Some of the principal doctrines of Buddhism found their references in the inscriptions. The importance of paying adoration to the Buddha is emphasized by the three long inscriptions of Ajanta in caves XVI, XVII and XXVI. The worship of the sainted elderly bhikshus was also an accepted practice. According to the inscriptions, supreme knowledge can be attained by making or donating a Buddha image. The Mahāyāna Buddhism made the effort to popularize the Buddha image by making the donation of it as a necessary condition by which one could attain supreme knowledge.

One of the fundamental doctrines of the Mahāyāna Buddhists that any human being can strive and become a Buddha is noticed
in the inscription of Kanheri cave III. It says, "May all living beings thereby become Buddhas". The belief in sharing one's merit with one's parents, relatives, friends and even all the sentient beings is reflected by no less than 23 inscriptions. The records made it very clear that merit can be accrued not only for the living friends and relatives but also to the deceased and even the unborn.

Nirvāṇa is described in the inscriptions as a state where a person remains youthful eternally and immortal. It is spoken of as the happy, fearless and houseless city of emancipation. It is represented as a state which is free from sorrow and pain and is tranquil and worthy. On the contrary, hell is represented as the place where sinners suffer great pain ceaselessly for many years. Avichi, Parītāpa and Kumbhipāka are some of the hells specifically mentioned by name in the inscriptions.

Misappropriation of the donated cash, cutting off of the gifts both architectural and sculptural pieces and committing a murder are described as sins which result in immediate retribution in the above mentioned hells. These sinful acts also perpetuate the cycle of births and deaths. The doctrine of the transmigration of the soul is clearly reflected in the inscriptions by the phrases: "repeated deaths and the like", "friendship during many births" and "in former existences".

Among the practices of the Buddhist Order, the vassāvāsa (rain-retreat) is most frequently referred to. If the vassāvāsa was in practice, then the pavāranā, distribution of kāṭhina cloth and the observance of the uposatha ceremony must have been in practice too, though they are not mentioned in the inscriptions,
because they are inter-related.

The erection of stupas in memory of the departed, reverend Buddhist saints is also very much evident in the inscriptions. The rock-cut stupas at Bhaja and the brick-stupas at Kanheri are still witnessing to us the fact that they were erected for the honour of some of the Buddhist saints in a very long long past.

The internal organ of the Buddhist Sangha is also exposed distinctly by the inscriptions in a quite detail manner. At the base of the ladder of ranks is the gahapati (householder), who does not take any pledge and who is not necessarily a Buddhist by faith. He is just a common man. Then comes the upasaka (lay-devotee), who makes a pledge to abstain from certain things and who takes the three refuges of Buddhism, viz., the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Then the pavajita or sāmaṇera, who takes the pabbajja rite and enters into the monastic life. When he is 20 years old, he takes the higher ordination called upasamāpadā at the nomination by his preceptor. After this, he becomes a full-fledged monk, a bhikshu, a member of the bhikshusangha and eligible to attend the Sanghakammas. When he completes ten years after his upasamāpadā, he is addressed as Thera-Bhikshu or Thera Bhadanta. Then depending upon his qualifications in the mastery of Tripitakas, he is addressed as Ācariya Thera Bhadanta or Thera Bhadanta Tevi-jja. The highest stage that a mortal can attain, before the Buddhahood, is the arhathood. The inscriptions refer to eight such arhats.

It has been noticed also that most of the monastic establishments in Western India were also centres for monastic education and the Thera Bhadantas were the qualified teachers. Some of the
most outstanding monastic educational centres in Western India were: Ajanta, Bhaja, Junnar, Kanheri, Karle, Kuda and Nasik.

Out of the many sects (about 24 as clearly given in the scriptures) only seven are mentioned in the inscriptions. They are: Mahāsanghika, Chaityaka, Aparaseliya, Dhammutariya, Bhadrayaniya, Kāsyapiya and Sammitiya. These sects are known to have flourished at Junnar, Kanheri, Karle and Nasik. The other local sects mentioned in the records are the Aparajita and the Adhagabhaka sects.

As far as the welfare of the Buddhist Sangha is concerned, the Sangha did really enjoy a series of continuous supports from all types of people starting from the king down to a cart-puller. Therefore, it had no problem of acquiring its basic needs, viz., shelter, food and clothing. These were provided in the form of rock-cut caves, lands and money respectively. Besides these, other necessities such as medicines, alms-bowls, sandals, meditation rooms, drinking rooms, repair works, religious books, expenses for worship, for lights and for decorations were meritoriously provided. Therefore, the Sangha was in a much better economic condition than what many people used to think of it.