Introduction

A. Western India

Although Western India is a land of contrasts: of hills and plains, wet and dry seasons, forests and cultivated valleys, bare rocks and laterite plateaus it has been a meeting place of many types of people and a number of religions from early historic times. Buddhism, as a religion, flourished in this region for over a millennium, i.e. from c. 250 B.C. to the tenth or eleventh century A.D. During this time Buddhism concentrated in a geographical area which includes the western districts of Maharashtra, viz., Aurangabad, Greater Bombay, Kolhapur, Nasik, Pune, Raigad, Ratnagiri, Satara and Thana. It is within this specified region that our inscriptions are obtained.

So the term "Western India" here would be confined to a slightly limited region falling within Konkan and Western Deccan. This has been done with a purpose of limiting ourselves to a well-knit politico-cultural territorial units, so that the whole problem of Buddhist Cave Inscriptions could be viewed in a common historical context and it is also in this area that a major concentration of centres of rock-cut temples with inscriptions is to be seen.

The inscriptions also referred to this region as Western India by the term "Aparânta". The earliest reference to it occurs in the fourth line of the fifth rock-edict of Asoka (274-232 B.C.). Aparânta also occurs in the Nasik inscription of Vasisthiputra Fulumavi (A.D. 149), in the Junagarh rock-inscription of Rudradaman I (A.D. 150), in a Junnar inscription of a Buddhist nun (A.D. 150), and a Kanheri inscription (A.D. 230). The Bhuvanakośa sections of the Furanas also testify that Western India was known as Aparânta.
It is estimated that in Western India alone there are about 80 centres of Buddhist establishments with a total of about 1500 excavations.

B. Inscriptions

In this work, an attempt is made to deal thoroughly with all the inscriptions, hitherto published, of the Western Indian caves of the Buddhist religion. The period under consideration spans roughly from c. 250 B.C. to A.D. 878, that is over a thousand years. The inscriptions are found widely distributed in 120 caves, boulders and rocks. In the present study, about 270 inscriptions are covered. Besides these there are a few more inscriptions which are badly damaged and effaced to the extent that nothing could be made out of them. The inscriptions are found in the following sites:

Ajanta..37   Ambivalie...1   Bedsa....3
Bhaja.....12   Ghatotkacha.1   Junnar....39
Kanheri...51   Karad.......1   Karle......35
Kol........3   Kondane....2   Kuda......31
Mahad.....2   Nadsur .......2   Nanaghat..10
Nasik.....27   Pale........1   Pitalkhora.7
Shelarwadi.2   Visapuf..10....5

As the inscriptions are mainly donative, most of them are engraved on the very object donated. Looking at the positions of the inscriptions, it appears that there were no fixed rule or convention as regards the place which the epigraphs were to occupy. They are engraved on almost every part of the cave and in any imaginable place on the facade of the caves, on the walls, around the chaitya-window arches, in the recesses on the facades, on walls on the mouldings of the doorways, around the windows and doorways, on the walls of the verandah, on the benches, on the images, on the stupas,
on the pillars, etc.\textsuperscript{11}

The inscriptions may broadly be divided as royal and private. The royal records are those issued either by the kings themselves or by the feudatory nobles, or by the provincial governors and other high officials who had the royal authority behind them, while the private records are those whose authors were persons who belonged to the commonality\textsuperscript{12}.

The script of the inscriptions is Brahmi but the language in which they are written resolve into three groups, with the exception of the Silahara inscriptions in Kanheri caves X and LXXVIII. The three groups are Prakrit, Mixed or Prakrit and Sanskrit and pure Sanskrit\textsuperscript{13}.

Though the inscriptions are about 300 in number, most of them are short records with one or two lines only. But they still provide us welcome data useful for the better understanding of the religious faith, social organizations and economic conditions besides throwing light on the nature of the monuments. Emphasis will be made, in the present study, on the religious beliefs and practices of the Buddhist religion in Western India. The inscriptions will serve as the backbone of the present study though collaborations from literary sources, particularly the Buddhist sacred texts, are used wherever necessary.
Notes and References


5. Junnar Inscription (Man. 26:34), Reread and translated by Dr. (Mrs) S. Gokhale of Deccan College, Poona, and due to be submitted to the Bhaqwanlal Indraji Commemoration Volume, 1985.

6. Kanheri Inscription (98:38), ASWI, V, p. 84.


10. The five inscriptions on the cisterns at Visapur were recently (January 17, 1985) discovered by Dr. (Mrs) S. Gokhale. The finder plans to read the inscriptions in the Epigraphical Conference to be held in Gauhati, 1986.


12. Ibid., p. 17.

13. Ibid., pp. 48, 52.