INTRODUCTION
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Periodisation in Art history has always been made in the context of political dynasties. It, indeed, disregards the creative nature of art-work. It produced blanket terms like Mauryan Art, Śunga Art, Sātavāhana Art, Vākātaka Art, etc. However, there are implied categories of conveniences in such denotations for assigning date brackets, but, more often than not, they are passive terms without much explanation of the relationship between the maker and the beholder. Such categorisations of art and architectural monuments in historical studies have grown out of an emphasis on the dynastic history of ancient India. Such studies have one common objective i.e. to label a particular work of art or a monument after a particular political dynasty. Thus, the entire idea of understanding a particular object of art in its historical context is completely neglected. It is indeed true as will be shown subsequently that the documentation and possible periodisation were major areas of concern in earlier studies. The trend continued for a long time even after exploring considerable evidences in the form of inscriptions and other archaeological data. Therefore, understanding of art and architectural monument remained much isolated, confining itself either to physical description or dynastic affiliations.

A work of art is a product of a particular situation, and comprises numerous extrinsic and intrinsic factors. The intrinsic factors are related to the formal qualities, attitude, and a set of conventions that are attached to the visual tradition whereas the extrinsic factors are concerned with patronage, religion and society. To analyse these twin factors, the historian has to explore varied source material. In such an exercise, to fix a particular mode of a visual language in a specific category would result in reducing the very existence of art and architecture monuments to a very generic category. A visual language is free from canonical structures of written language. It even symbolises lengthy verbal data into a simple pictorial form. Thus, to explain the matter in a more organised way, it can be said that articulation of visual language has no fixed rules like the grammatical structure of the written language. Therefore, any discourse on visual language needs to be explained in the realm of its historical context, which crosses the boundary of political power. By going beyond a narrow concern of dynastic affiliations, a
wider meaning of the visual language can be understood in relation to a particular historical situation. At the same time, merely evaluating aesthetic quality of work of art would result in its isolation from the overall understanding of the historical situation in which the creative mind works. Thus, inquiry into the analysis of pictorial language has to be linked to the other field of inquiry.

Chronology is an integral part in any historical inquiry. It is not intended in the present work to go into the question of chronology once again. Instead, an attempt has been made to depart from such exclusive chronological problems to the wider understanding of different issues that are involved in the making of art and architectural remains in western Deccan. The present work is confined to the Buddhist caves of western Deccan. The period of inquiry is from 2nd century BC to 4th century AD. It is fairly a long period where many rock-cut cave monuments have been excavated. Traditionally, two distinct phases are considered in the Western Deccan Buddhist cave tradition i.e. the Hinayāna phase and the Mahāyāna phase. The Hinayāna phase is generally indicated by the absence of Buddha image whereas the Mahāyāna phase is identified by the presence of the Buddha images. Though this framework of categorisation of the Hinayāna and Mahāyāna phases itself is highly problematic, in the case of western Deccan, there is a lacuna of evidences, hence, the present criterion of identification is accepted. The rock-cut cave excavation of the Hinayāna and the Mahāyāna phases are analysed in all the previous studies more with the main concern of their chronology. But, knowingly or unknowingly, these two different phases were treated far away from each other, as if there is no relationship between the two and they are two different modes of representations. However, in the present work, an attempt has been made to establish a link between the Hinayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhist caves in the region, which may be termed as a ‘missing-link’. The problem of a link between the two has not been seen in isolation but more in terms of the gradual progression in the art and architectural language; hence the mature art and architecture at Ajanta and elsewhere in 5-6th century AD were not overnight achievements.
The Mahāyāna phase in Western Deccan so far has been thought as a 5th century AD development. The assumption is based on certain inscriptive evidences. There is also one more criterion for the assumption of the 5th century AD development i.e. the notion of 'the golden age theory'. Social historians discarded the notion of the golden age theory but in art-historical enquiries, it remained in focus while studying developments in 5th and 6th century AD of Indian art. In the case of western Deccan, as the Mahāyāna development is assigned to the fifth century AD, the entire exercise resulted in searching for the possible sources for the growth of the Mahāyāna imagery outside western Deccan. The principal idea of enquiry in the present analysis is centred around exploring varied evidences to trace the early Mahāyāna cave activity within the region itself. Though the question is confined to a particular geographical area, nevertheless, it is not approached with a closed mind as certain distinct elements have been borrowed from outside western Deccan, which can easily be ascertained from the pictorial and iconographic conventions. Such assimilations always result in the eclectic nature of visual language. The underlying principle in this case is an attitude and ideas that are evolved in the representation of art and architectural monuments. An image gains importance because it has a capacity of expression. Consequently, the power of an image lies in the idea of religious and social institutions. In the present case, it is a bond between the Buddhist Sangha and patrons, which constitute the power of image and monument in art and architecture. This mainly lies in the history of patronage. Patronage is an important factor in the making of a monument, but the visual language is not governed by the economics of patronage. Such a narrow generalisation will result in reductionist arguments. The information with which artisans work may not be available to the beholder but even then reading of an image or a monument largely depends on the cultural norms that are evolved from time to time. Conventions, therefore, evolve through cultural practices. Artisans work with conventions and arrive at certain visual formula, which reflect their mind and attitude to decorative vocabulary.

The analysis in the present work has been attempted in order to probe certain issues, as a significant departure from the earlier studies; hence the approach is highly eclectic. Issues that are addressed in the present work are varied. These issues have been
raised to understand the process of changes in Western Deccan, rather than mere chronology of the monuments as such. Certain cave sites are not found mentioned here such as Nasik, Junnar, Uran, Kol, Elephanta and Pali-Sudagarh, Virar. Nasik and Junnar have been dealt with elsewhere. Cave site at Uran cave site could not be located. Pali-Sudagarh has not been included due to lack of field work. Caves of Kol, Virar and Elephanta have been studied earlier in details. Hence these sites are conspicuously absent in the present analysis. Karad is another big site but due to lack of thorough field-work, not all the caves have been studied. Questions that are addressed in the present work are (a) mode of visual perception of design, (b) nature of circumstances in which the rock-cut caves have been made, (c) role of artisans; their development of pictorial conventions and modifications to arrive at certain architectural language; (d) conventions and techniques as an innovation, along with the application of skill together with circumstantial necessity; (e) artisans relationship with the Buddhist Sangha and the patrons; (f) locating the caves in historical regions and study the development within a particular historical region; (g) visible effect of the patronage in the architectural language; (h) to explore possible point of departure in the scheme of evolving distinct Mahāyāna characteristics in the cave architecture; (i) the development of door frames within the region itself.

It must be added that the religious development as reflected through iconography is not dealt with in the present work as it requires separate and intensive study of socio-religious changes in the early historical period of Indian history. Though the present study is not exclusively confined to the chronology of caves, some criteria for the dating have been suggested, as no single criterion can be dependent upon. Dating sequence is taken into account from the previous studies, and whenever it differs, it has been explained adequately. Similarly, detailed description of each and every cave is eliminated to avoid repetition.

Chapter I 'Approaches to Early Indian Art and Architecture: The Caves of Western Deccan' explains the earlier studies on Western Deccan caves. It has been divided into two sections- (i) the studies on the Hinayāna caves, and (ii) the studies on the Mahāyāna caves. However, only the works, which are exclusively on the rock-cut caves of western Deccan have been considered.
Chapter-II is on ‘Background’ and is divided into several sub-sections, mainly the geographical factors, historical regions and location of cave sites within certain historical regions, political conditions and religious factors. The political background has been discussed extensively, especially the Sātavāhana chronology in relation to the western Deccan Buddhist caves. Chronology of the Traikutakas and Konkaṇ Mauryas has been discussed at length with fresh evidences and their implications in recognising the early Mahāyāna cave excavations in the region. 

Chapter III is on ‘Patronage’, in which the categories of patrons, object of donations, their place of origin and the relationship with the artisans are discussed. An attempt has been made to see the patronage in the historical regions in a chronological perspective. At the end, an overview on patronage is discussed, where observations are derived from the analysis of patronage activity in different historical region. The main source of information is inscriptive records in the caves itself. It may also be mentioned that inscriptions do not occur in every cave. There are sites like Junnar, Karad having many cave excavations but many without inscriptions. Therefore, the number of cave excavations is also a criterion to understand the patronage activity or the very making of the cave excavations itself is an indication of support to the Buddhist Sangha.

Chapter IV is on Art & Architecture-I. The first section deals with the possible criteria for the reconstruction of chronology. The criterion is determined on the basis of various factors and not on one single factor, as it was done in previous studies. It involves political chronology wherever applicable, palaeography, stylistic conventions of sculptural and architectural language. The second section discusses various Hinayāna cave sites in each historical region. The sequence of analysis has been traced in chronological order at a particular cave-site. Besides, the caves which are found significant, are analysed, and therefore not all the caves are discussed. The analysis deals with the conventions, techniques, options the artisans exercised, and relationship between architectural language and the nature of patronage.

Chapter V is on Art & Architecture-II, where the early development of the Mahāyāna caves in the region has been discussed in detail. The analysis not only aims at tracing the early Mahāyāna activity in the region but also its further development at Ajanta. The
problem of the development of the Mahāyāna cave has been traced within the tradition of the western Deccan caves. The sites mainly-- Ajanta, Kanheri, Kondivite and Mahad are discussed in this context. Chapter VI is the conclusion in which certain observations are derived from the analysis in the earlier chapters. At the end, an appendix on the chronology of Ajanta caves as put-forth by Walter Spink is provided. Though the later caves at Ajanta are not part of the present enquiry, they have been found necessary because the present work aims at tracing the early Mahāyāna activity at Kanheri and Ajanta. Therefore, Walter Spink’s chronology has been questioned on historical and art-historical evidences that are present in the western Deccan itself.