



A remarkable relation of loss to recovery and attainment of absolute knowledge: A study on a fascinating masterpiece of Ajanta Paintings from *Mahajanaka Jataka*

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ABSTRACT

The *Mahajanaka Jataka* is one of the last ten birth story of the Bodhisattva or Buddha's previous life, which is more popular in Buddhist iconography, the Ajanta cave paintings especially in Cave no. 1 and also in some ancient manuscripts in Thailand, South-East Asia. The ten birth tales used to describing the great qualities of the Buddha (*Paramita*). The *Mahajanaka Jataka* symbolises diligence of human life. How a man named *Mahajanaka*, from a destitute traveller regained his own kingdom. From that, one can observed from every aspect of his strength of mind, his steady determination, and the cruel irony of fate which makes him idol of the character. It is true that he established his royalty in *Mithila* but never want to depict himself as in royal life in *Mithila*. The welfare of all was sole objective. Did he really want to become the king of *Mithila*? Where there was the trapping of pleasure and luxury life. Or he wanted to be the kings of people's heart, so that he should show the path of the happiness, love, welfare of humanity throughout the world. The main aim of this paper is to explain the murals of *Mahajanak jataka* through the Ajanta paintings and go through the composition of paintings to identify the character of *Mahajanaka* by study of literary technique from the *Jataka* tales and discuss what are the perspectives of his character in social life



Introduction

The *Jataka* stories are vividly illustrated on the wall of Ajanta caves. The murals in Ajanta caves represent the birth of finest and oldest artistic institution in India. Between 200 B.C. to roughly 480 A.D. this artistic tradition explore in the ring of caves at the site of Ajanta which is located in mountain of Sahyadri hills, in chatrapati Sambhaji Nagar district of Maharastra, India on the bank of Waghur river. The caves carved in Sahyadri hills at the site.

Depicting Buddhist themes, these artists told the stories of the *Jataka*, moral fables based on the life of the Buddha and his past life. The story of *Mahajanaka Jataka* is among the most accepted Buddhist fables, retold as Far as East in Thailand. The stories of *Jataka* are tales about the previous lives of Goutam Buddha, where he appears in human and animal form. These murals are famous example of Buddhist art which teach and express the life teachings of Buddha his previous incarnation. How Buddha born in different incarnation, and in each birth he has given some about the life to our society. He gives a massage to the society, and how he progressed towards becoming The Buddha and made himself ideologically fit to be reborn as a Goutam Buddha in final birth in Lumbini, Kapilabasthu is describe.

In cave no. 1 of the Ajanta it can be seen in narrative representation by paintings. The cave no. 9 and 10 are from earlier phase of 2nd century B.C. and cave no. 1, 2, 16, 17 are from a later phase from 5th century C.E. Here, two types of structural architectures have been seen, these are- *Chaityas* and *Viharas* carved in Sahyadri hills, is finest example of Buddhist art and architecture.

In Ajanta caves, *chaityas* are rock-cut prayer halls or assembly halls for Buddhist worship and at the centre of it is a *stupa*, a dome-shaped Buddhist shrine. A horseshoe-shaped *chaitya* window, echoing roof's curve, provides light from the outside. Of the 30 caves at Ajanta, five are *chaityas* [cave no. 9, 10, 19, 26, 29] and rest are *Viharas*. The *Viharas*, a feature of central hall surrounded by small cells or rooms where the monks serving as monasteries for spiritual learning and living. These are the residential quarters for monks.

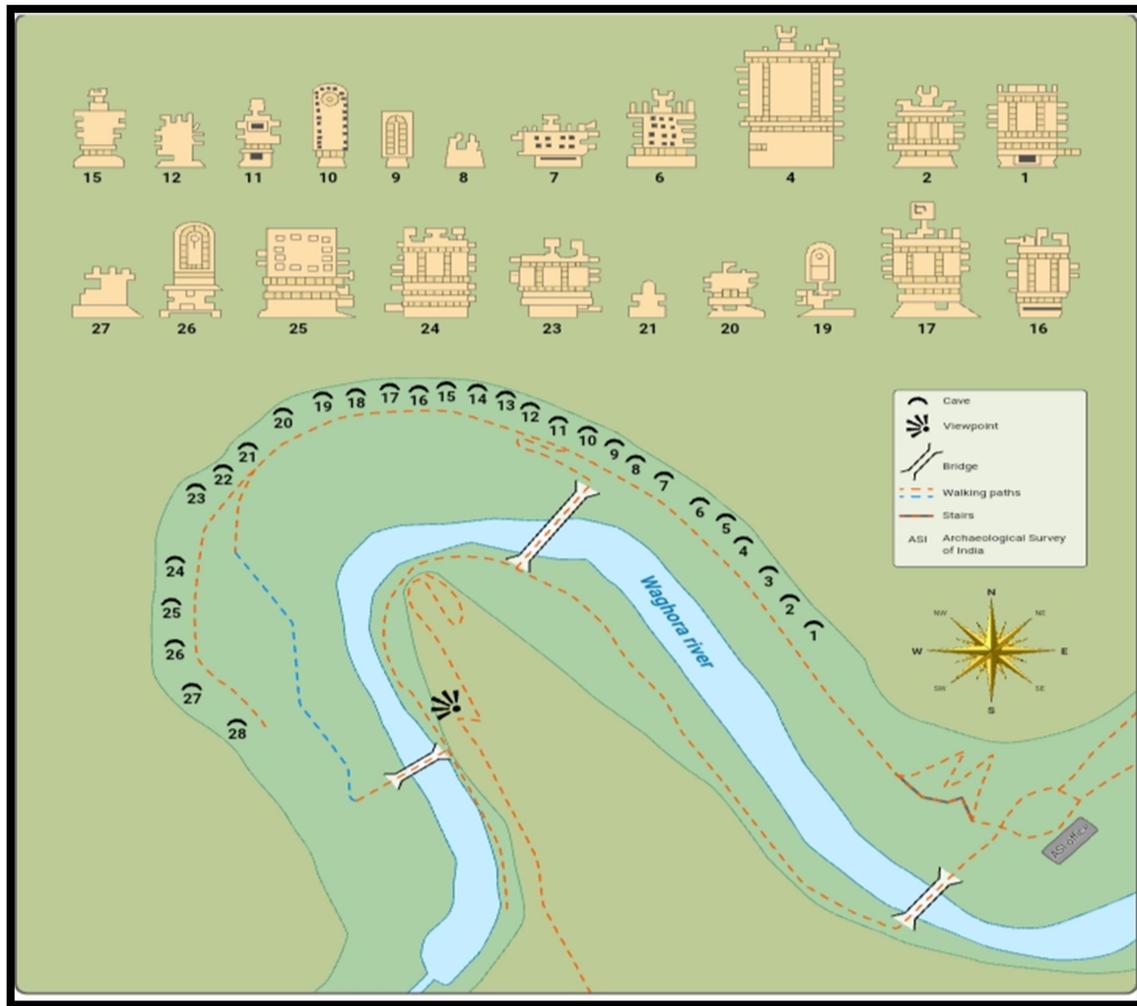


Plate no.1- Ground plan and Map of the Ajanta caves

The *Jataka* stories depicted across all 30 caves but specifically eminent paintings can be found in six caves of cave no. 1, 2, 9, 10, 16, and 17.

Tradition of natural colour was used in Ajanta paintings. The main acknowledged pigments red, yellow and brown ochre, white limestone, green earth from local mineral sources and natural blue from Lapislazuli was imported from Afghanistan. Black colour utilized from lamp black. Primarily they used red, black and white. Outline of the paintings were done by red colour.

According to legends, artists tackled the darkness of the caves with lamp or bucket of water; the buckets reflected light from outside the caves- and enabled the artists to make some of finest, most complex paintings in Indian Art History. The walls, ceilings and entire composition of paintings and rock carvings, are reflecting the artistry of the *Satavahana* and *Vakataka* dynasties.



Description of *Mahajanaka Jataka*, with Relation of his Loss to Recovery & Apperception of absolute knowledge

One of the most imperative compositions is *Mhajanaka Jataka* in the Ajanta paintings dated 6th century A.D. It is one of the survival painting compositions which can be narrating the detailed fact of the stories. It was told to *bhikkus* by the Buddha himself at the forest of *Jetvana* in northern India, Utter Pradesh.

Bodhi-satva as *Mahajanaka*, whose father displaced from his kingdom by his brother, *Pola-janaka*, and mother escaped with him while pregnant. When he discovered the truth of his ancestry the prince vowed to regain his father's kingdom. *Mahajanaka* went all over the world as a merchant and amassed enough wealth to fulfil his wisdom. He set out a voyage on the sea with the aim of building a better fortune. However, the ship sank in the middle of the ocean and everyone killed by sea monsters except the prince. He drifted in the ocean for seven days without food but he survived alone through the strength of his strong determination. He refused to take any help from the Gods. Then a Goddess *Manimekhala* lifted him from the water and flew him to the royal garden of *Mithila* in his father's kingdom and he finally regained his kingdom by remarkable way.

In between, his uncle, *Pola-janaka* expired survived by most beautiful egotistical daughter *Shivaali*. Three almost impossible conditions were set to marry her. *Mahajanaka* fulfilled all three and married *Shivaali*. But palace life was not to his liking. While strolling in the royal mango grove, *Mahajanaka* observes how a fruit-laden tree is ravaged by local people, while a barren tree is left untouched. This incident makes him strengthen to recognize the peace and leave from rich and materialistic life. On the other hand, *Shivaali* was his uncle's daughter and so in that sense she would be his sister in relation of blood. So, In spite of the pleading from his queen, *Mahajanaka* finally renounced the world and went to the *Himavali hills* to meditate upon the truth. He discovered the truths of life and left his kingdom which he touched more for receiving back by tough effort. He pursued his kingdom for a time being, but he left that also, to hunt the peace of spiritual life.

It is the story of one who would rather perish than give up. He Born with loss, loss of kingdom and without his father's love and support. Then he recovers all problems and healing his life. He regains his father's kingdom, *Mithila*. He arranges marriage with most beautiful lady, the princess of *Mithila*, *Shivaali* but *Mahajanaka* could not stop thinking about new realisation of life. His queen *Shivaali* tries to persuade him to stay in

the royal palace, she arranging dance, she dressed up to seduced him but *Mahajanaka* remains steadfast in his decision. He never gives up, he makes himself stronger and stronger. He wants to detach himself from this royal life. So, one day, he can left this family life to go his own way to find his soul and truth. Few days before, the people of *Mithila* were overjoyed over the return of their rightful king, but they also loss their king right now. Their happiness has gone within few days after receiving new king. *Shivaali* loss his love but she will regain it in her next birth. In this life she will be going through a long way of spiritual bond with the world. *Shivaali* also follows the same and make hermit herself, achieving spiritual attainment. *Bodhisatva* as *Mahajanaka* also will go long across the path of spiritual life to find the truth of happiness but in this life he cannot fulfil it. Next birth *Shivaali* will rebirth as *Gopa*, the wife of Goutam Buddha and give birth of their only child, *Rahul*. In this birth *Shivaali* as *Gopa* can get his love with baby son, she will fulfil her wisdom. As so, Goutam Buddha also recovers his absolute knowledge of truth, he will fulfil his duty of world. In Ajanta cave no. 1, narration of the story starts after the marriage of *Mahajataka* and *shivaali* through the paintings.

Composition of *Ajanta* Paintings Cave no. 1

The *Mahajanaka Jataka* is popular *Jataka* collection and theme in Cave no.1 at Ajanta. The murals in the *Ajanta* caves no.1 showcase the four act of *Mahajanaka*. The mural is a notable feature on the left wall of cave no.1, spanning over 7 meters.

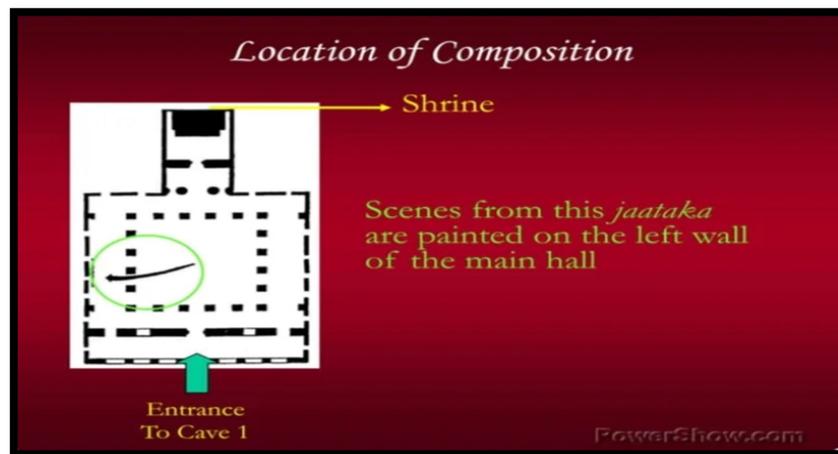


Plate no.2- ground plan of cave no.1 at Ajanta (source- slideshare.net)



Plate no.3- Composition of *Mahajanaka Jataka* at Ajanta (source- slideshare.net)

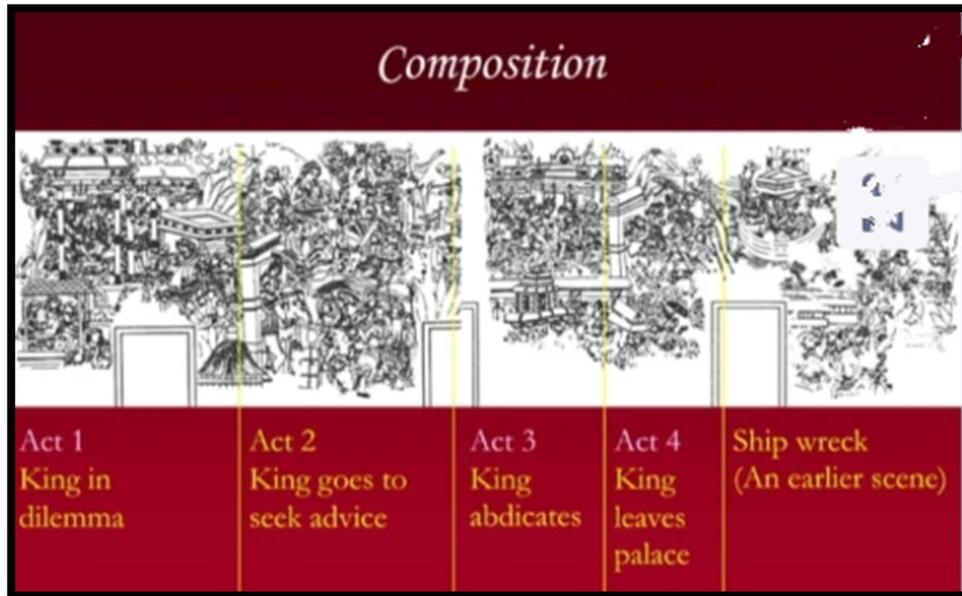


Plate no.4- Composition of *Mahajanaka Jataka* at cave no. 1 (Source- slideshare.net)

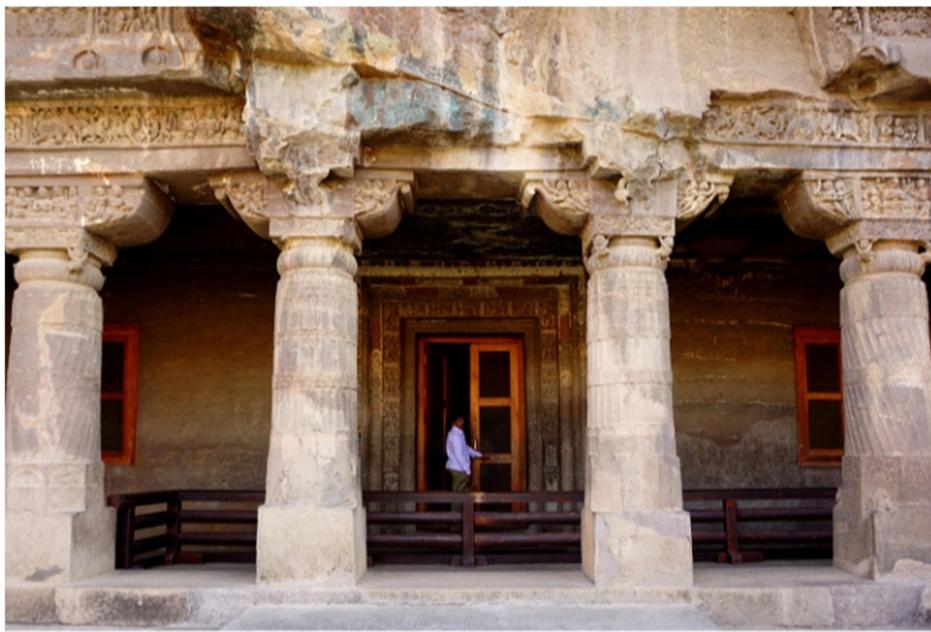




Plate no.5- Entrance and Outer View of Cave no.1, Ajanta

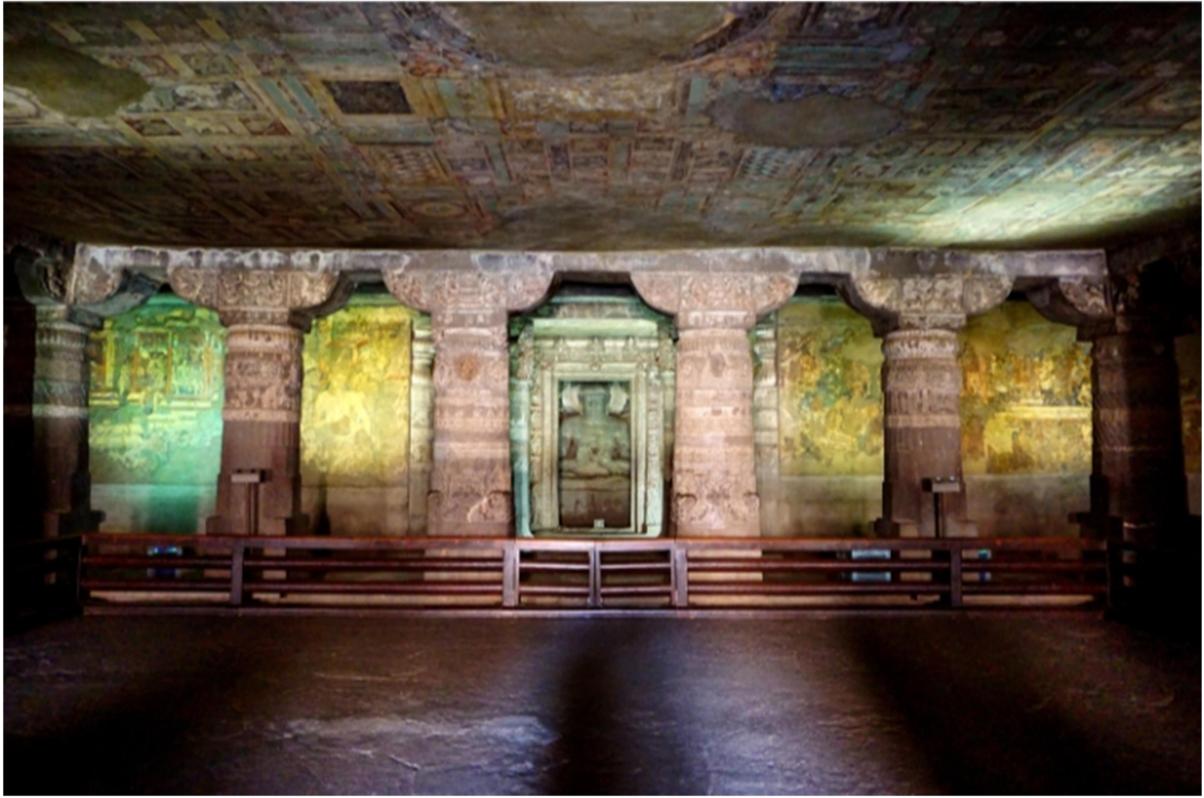


Plate no.6- Inner View of Cave no.1, Ajanta



Plate no.7- Composition of the *Mahajanaka Jataka* in Ajanta painting, Cave no.1

Act One

Mahajanaka in Dilemma- The portrayal of Mahajanaka, sometimes called 'The king in Dilemma', and highlights the story of *Mahajanaka* from palace life to his eventual decision of hermit himself from worldly life. In the first composition, Mahajanaka is visible with lot of jewelleryes and spending royal life with his queen shivaali.



Plate no.8- *Mahajanaka* in royal court, with dancer, musicians, cave no.1, Ajanta

Act Two

Kings seeks Advice- He goes to *Himavali* hills to seek advice from an ascetic. *Mahajanaka* have been faced some new realisation, so he quest for discussing to find the truth of life. *Mahajanaka* goes out from the palace on elephant with royal procession. The ascetic is delivering sermon and *Mahajanaka* listens it with very concentrate, utter surrender and his both hands folded in prayer. In this act, he casting off most jewelleryes, and try for making himself an ordinary person as others.



Plate no.9 & 10- *Mahajanaka* goes out on an elephant, a pair of deer with face tilted up in rapt attention to listen the sermon.

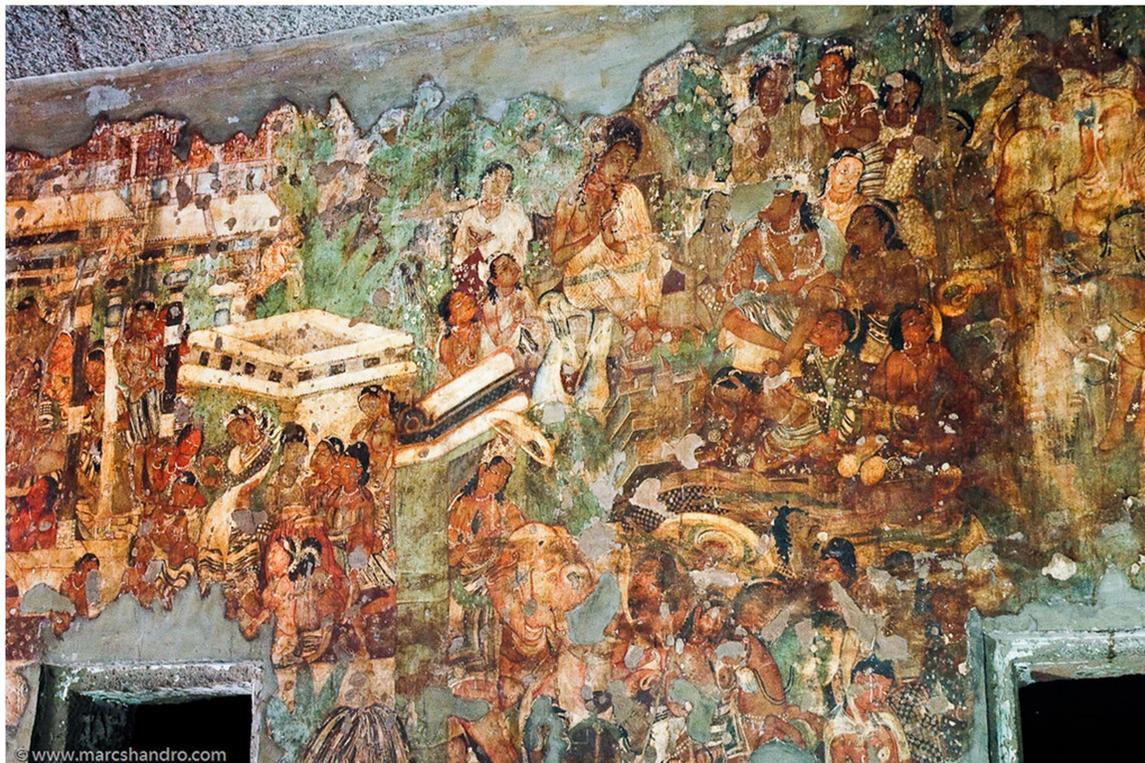


Plate no.11- *Mahajanaka* going to visit *himavali hills* on elephant with royal procession, cave no.1, Ajanta

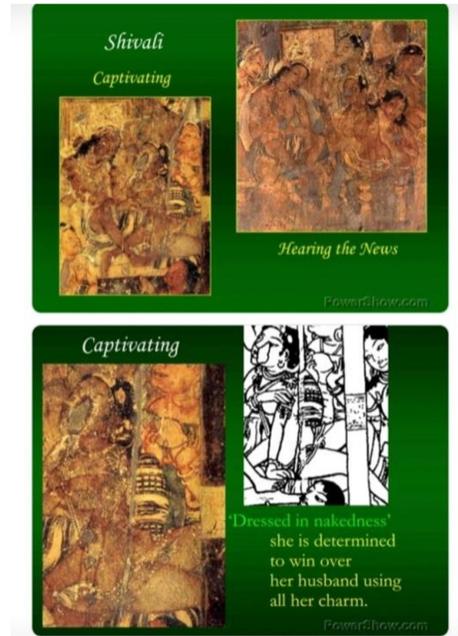


Plate no.12- *Mahajanaka* meets an Ascetic in *Himavali hills*, cave no.1, Ajanta

Act Three

***Mahajanaka* announces his decision**— The enlightened king announces his decision to abdicate. He has cut off everything, including the sacred-thread and carrying less jewellery on himself. His hand is in a preaching-attitude showing he has now found the path. Shivaali wants to win him but she failed. She is not successful in holding back the king. Shivaali hearing the news when royal maids when they are talking on it.



Plate no.13- king announces his decision to abdicate.**Plate no.-14****Plate no.-15****Plate no.14- *Shivaali* hearing the news of abdication****Plate no.15- *Shivaali* captivating to win the king's mind****Act Four**

***Mahajanaka* abdicates** – Finally, the king leaves the kingdom to meditate on the *Dharma*, the spiritual path of absolute truth. *Mahajanaka* goes out through the Palace-gate on a horse. In this portrayal, horse is very significant. Like Buddha, *Mahajanaka* also leaves the palace by horse. Horse is symbol of '*Mahabhinishkramana*' (The Great Departure of Goutam Buddha from his royal life).

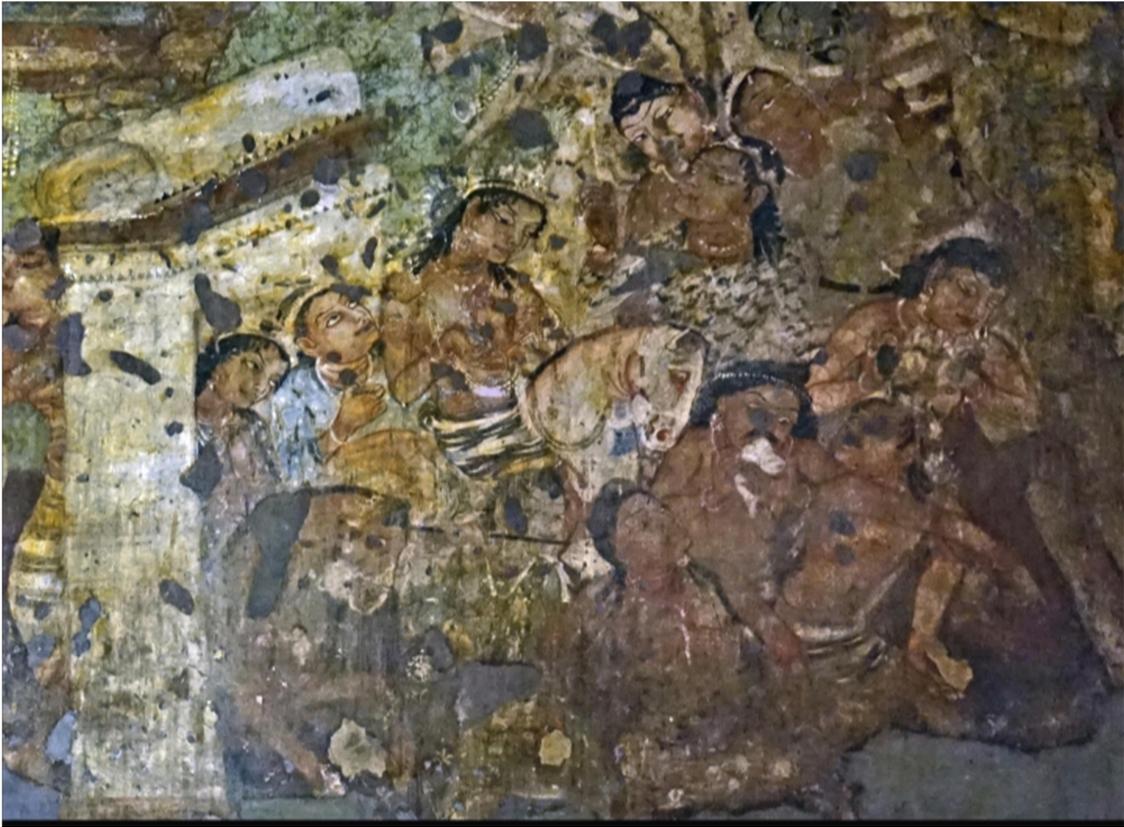


Plate no.16- Finally *Mahajanaka* leaves the kingdom on a horse

Significance of *Mahajanaka Jataka* & *Ajanta* paintings

1. Symbolism of Perseverance and Wisdom

1. A. Overcoming Obstacles- The composition of paintings illustrated the path to enlightenment by emphasizing perseverance, spiritual and the rejection of materialism. He is symbol of virtue of courage, determination in the face of intricacy, including dangers at sea to royal conflict.

2. B. Spiritual Enlightenment- The *Mahajanaka Jataka*'s significance lies in its delineation of the *Paramita* of perseverance (*viriyā*) through the story of king *Mahajanaka*. The tales, significant for its depiction of resilience and spiritual truth, is famous example of Buddhist art. It used to teach and convey the life and teaching of Buddha and his previous incarnations. *Mahajanaka* represents the wisdom to renounce the transient nature of wealth and power.

2. Artistic and Cultural Significance

2. A. - Art and Architecture- The *Ajanta* caves is renowned archaeological site for their rock cut architecture, sculptures, and frescoes depicting Buddhist stories. The walls, ceilings and entire structure



ornamented with paintings, carving, reflecting the artistry of ancient India. It offers scope for a study of art style and method of storytelling of this period and provides rich information on the subject of jewellery, textile and dress, musical instruments, art and architecture, etc. It is impotent from art history in point of view because the example of a classical elegance to baroque ostentation.

2. B. - Inspiration of Arts- The tales inspired contemporary artistic explanation which emphasizes topic like education and social progress. This mural affords excellent scope for studying portrayal of characters, continuity in dress and physical features of characters with different expressions and postures. The contrasts in the expression of characters are bringing out in all murals while making significance narratives of the story.

3. Historical Importance

3. A. - Jataka Tales- The historical background of *Jatakas* are moral fables based on the life of Buddha and his previous life. These are important historical account to understand social lifestyle, economic status, social division, fashion as well as composition of literature during that period. *Mahajanak jataka*, the mural in cave no. 1 in Ajanta, is one of the masterpieces in classical art history of India.

3. B. - Sea Trade and Navigation- The story of *Mahajanak Jataka* gives detailed description of flora, fauna, and the characteristics of ocean for those times. It provides valuable insights into the maritime knowledge and naval practice of ancient India. The composition of *Mahajanak Jataka* in cave no. 1 is showcasing story of after his marriage with princes *Shivaali*.

Conclusion

The story highlights the importance of finding inner peace and happiness and emphasizes the Buddhist principal of detachment from worldly possessions. The story concludes with *Mahajanaka* and his queen finding their way in spiritual path rather than worldly success of their life. *Mahajanaka* left the palace to become a hermit. He cut a stalk of grass to show his queen *shivaali* that their paths could not be joined again in this life. The story shows the way out of an unstable emotional tension and addiction to worldly wealth. The most interesting aspect is the recovery from loss. In his life, he wants recover his kingdoms, but after that, he wants to gain some spiritual path and absolute knowledge. Although he lost everything, he actually did not lose; he wants to leave his kingdom, his wife, and his royal luxury. This is because he seeks to search for absolute knowledge about what life is, what the aim of life is, what the actual knowledge of life is. Life can be uncertain at the best of the time. Sorrow can come suddenly. The cheerfulness can be moved without any notice. Even the rich and the beautiful, even powerful and regal



are subject to the whims and caprice of life and time. The story reflects ancient Indian cultural themes of king-ship, trade, perseverance and pursuit of spiritual enlightenment.

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