

CAVE TOURISM ACROSS THE APARANT REGION

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ABSTRACT

India is a treasure house of various heritage monuments. Maharashtra claims the first position in order to receive “World Heritage Site” status for Ajanta Caves conferred by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Caves are historically important natural structures visited by tourists at a large scale, giving rise to the concept of “Cave Tourism”. Cave Tourism is a concept catering to the tourists who are attracted towards the caves for educational activities, research, and recreation and many more. The Aparant region of Konkan houses many such caves who are believed to have their connection to the Ancient Silk Route. Kanheri caves, Mandapeshwar caves, Caves at Jogeshwari and Mahakali caves are located across this Aparant region representing different faiths of the times. All these caves have flourished at different points of time during the ancient era. In spite of huge cultural-historical contribution and strategic location, these caves are not explored to their fullest extent.

This paper tries to bring into limelight the offbeat destinations of the Aparant which have a huge potential of cave tourism. It also tries to analyze how cave tourism can be used as tool for the development of the local community and can become a source of income for the people living around these caves.

Key words - Heritage, Tourism, Cave Tourism, Aparant, Mandapeshwar caves.

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“If I were to look over the whole world to find out the country most richly endowed with all the wealth, power, and beauty that nature can bestow- in some parts a very paradise on earth-I should point to India”- F. Max Muller (Muller, 2000: xvi)

India's association with History doesn't fail to amaze onlookers even in the modern times through its heritage. India has captivated the attention of travellers' right from the ancient times till date. With the world increasingly becoming aware of the heritage, India is bracing herself to showcase its rich heritage beyond the conventional attractions. Towards this, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) is already working for rejuvenating silk route of ancient times which connected the world. India was an invariable part of this silk route.

The region of north Konkan and especially Kanheri Caves point at its probable link with the silk routes. Northern Konkan houses many such caves located across the trade routes like Mandapeshwar caves, Jogeshwari caves, Mahakali caves. These caves were significant for the merchants, artisans, Buddhist monks who have greatly contributed for their construction and maintenance. These caves can be offbeat attractions because of their location, which was strategic in the earlier times and is accessible in the modern times.

With the increasing volume of travellers coming to visit such places, a new type of tourism has emerged which focuses on exploring caves and attempting to reconstruct the history with the help of this natural heritage. Caves help in understanding the socio-cultural dynamics, economic conditions of the era they were constructed in. Historians can also utilize their potential for the development of the region with the newly evolved concept of cave tourism. Tourism Development Plan for Mumbai city and Suburbs includes Mandapeshwar caves, Jogeshwari caves, Mahakali caves and Kanheri caves under different units as Heritage properties. However, a detailed plan towards the same can be carved out from the point of view of cave tourism.

The region around suburban Mumbai was known as the Aparant in the ancient times. It houses approximately 200 caves which can be subdivided into two distinct groups belonging to different cultural faiths, namely, Hindu caves and Buddhist Caves. The Mahakali caves and Kanheri caves are Buddhist caves whereas Jogeshwari caves , Mandapeshwar caves are Brahmanical (Hindu) caves. The two commercial ports of Shurparaka (Sopara), now famously known as Nala Sopara and Kalyan could be the two accessing points across the cave trail. The Kanheri caves, Mandapeshwar caves, Jogeshwari caves and Mahakali caves are located between these two accessing points.

Kanheri cave complex located in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Borivali was an important seat of learning during the ancient period as well. It is mentioned by the names Krishnagiri, Kanhagiri in the ancient times. The cave complex became an important structure because of its proximity with thriving cities and trade centres like Suparaka (Sopara), Kalyan. The Kanheri caves have been flourishing with the help of generous contributions by royal families, merchants, Buddhist monks. Architectural remains at the cave complex are of two types- *chaityas* and *viharas*. There are more than 100 caves in Kanheri most of them depicting Buddhist influence prevalent in the region during the ancient times. The Kanheri cave complex houses sculpture of Buddha with abhayamudra, depiction of Avalokiteshvar, portrayal of a panel of Manushi Buddha-s with the eighth Buddha Maitreya. Some of the cave complexes have *chndrashilas*. Some of them are well preserved. The inscriptions at the Kanheri caves , provide valuable insights into further study of Kanheri caves. There are approximately more than 50 inscriptions, more than 20

epigraphs. Inscriptions in Brahmi and Devanagari and 3 Pahlavi epigraphs are valuable treasures of heritage in the Kanheri cave complex. Inscriptions, sculptures at Kanheri caves speak thousand words of transitions witnessed over a period of time. Xuan Zang, a Chinese Buddhist monk had visited Kanheri cave complex, in the 7th century CE. He mentioned about a story pertinent to the foundation of Kanheri monastery in his travelogue. Though the story has no collaborative evidence proving its historical validity, the visit made by overseas traveller still proves to be of great significance due to the evidence supporting presence of Achala, a senior monk mentioned in Xuan Zang travelogue. Xuan Zang has also carried with him to China wooden image and manuscript of Ekadasamukha Avalokiteshvara Dharani found at Kanheri Caves.

Mahakali caves are located near Kondivati village in the modern suburban Mumbai and hence are called as “Kondivate Caves” too by J M Campbell. These are Buddhist caves consisting of *chaityagrihas* and *viharas*. James Fergusson has brought to the notice the similarities between *chaityagriha* at Mahakali with that of *chaityagriha* at Sudama, Barabar hills in Bihar. The Mahakali cave complex has 19 caves in total. The first 3 caves are interconnected having a *stupa* into it. Cave number 4, 5 are *viharas*. Cave number 9 is the main cave showcasing its similarity with Buddhist caves in Bihar, as per M Campbell. This cave is called as Anasicha Kamara. Cave number 9 houses an inscription as well in Pali language which is translated by Bhagvanlal Indraj. The representation of Buddha in the Mahakali caves is a matter of further study. However, these simple caves can definitely take onlookers back to the ancient times.

Jogeshwari caves are Shaiva caves believed to be Shaiva Pashupata centre in western India. Though the temple is now known as Jogeshwari Temple, during the ancient times, it might be a shrine of *Yogiswara* (Shiva) along with his consort Yogeswari. The current name Jogeshwari might have been derived from the same. The Jogeshwari caves houses many scenes depicted from the mythology. *Ravana* shaking the Mount Kailash, sculptures of Kartikeya, Ganesha and Bhairava are remarkable. There are three sculptural panels in the cave complex which depict *Lakulisa*, *Aksakrida* and *Kalyansundaram* as observed by K.V.Sundararajan. The Jogeshwari cave complex houses an illegible *Brahmi* inscription and the famous Cintra stone inscription which is now preserved in Lisbon, Portugal. Cintra stone inscription is a valuable source for the study of the Jogeshwari caves.

Mandapeshwara caves are 2 small Hindu caves. The Portuguese captured and destroyed the cave sculptures converting it into Monpezier or Monpacer church and college which later on became popular by the name Mandapeshwar during the reign of Maratha Empire. These caves have *chandrashila*, sculpture of Nataraja, small sculpture of Lakulisa. Cave Number 1 at Mandapeshwara cave complex can be divided into 5 cells.

While Jogeshwari, Kanheri and Mahakali, Mandapeshwar caves can be explored who could mark their presence in tourism development plan of Mumbai and Suburban Mumbai region, Megathane caves are yet to be achieving this feat too. Megathane caves are in a bad condition today which if not protected now, may be vanished in the years to come. The Megathane cave is housing sculpture of Buddha in the main cave who is locally known as Dharmaraja. Panels in the caves are probably depicting *Taras*, *Avalokiteshvara* are known as panels of Pandavas. They are named after Pandavas, *Draupadi*, *Kunti*.

Aparant houses such a huge treasure house of different faiths which need to be brought to the limelight in the modern times. According to the tourism development plan, positive intervention of tour guides will help generating awareness among the people regarding this chain of caves. These caves are located on the trade route hence are in an order if one starts exploring them. One can begin with cave tourism of the Aparant region from Mandapeshwar caves and can go to Megathane caves which are just 5 Kilometres (approximately) away from each other. The Kanheri Caves can be the next destination which is approximately 8 Kilometres away from the Megathane caves. The next destination, the Jogeshwari caves are approximately 18 Kilometres away from the Kanheri caves. Whereas, the Mahakali caves are approximately 4 Kilometres away from the Jogeshwari caves. Moreover, the Jogeshwari and the Mahakali caves are interlinked with each other with Jogeshwari-Vikroli Link road. This overview clearly signifies the potential of Aparant region for promotion of cave tourism. The entry fee is charged at Kanheri caves, Mahakali caves and Jogeshwari caves, where as there is no entry fee for Mandapeshwar caves, Megathane caves. This cave tourism circuit can be effectively completed in 3 days (maximum). Local people, who are curious about heritage and history, can join hands to develop this cave tourism by providing detailed information to the tourists of the ancient heritage. This will generate employment opportunities for them and also create awareness among the local people. With the increase in tourist influx, small scale businesses can flourish in the vicinity of the caves.

In the modern times, when study of diversified faiths, ancient religions have rose to prominence the Aparant region can carve out its own cave tourism circuit. While international organizations are planning to develop ancient silk route, the Aparant can focus on its ancient trade route which also has its linkages with the silk route with the concrete support of governmental organizations in India.

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