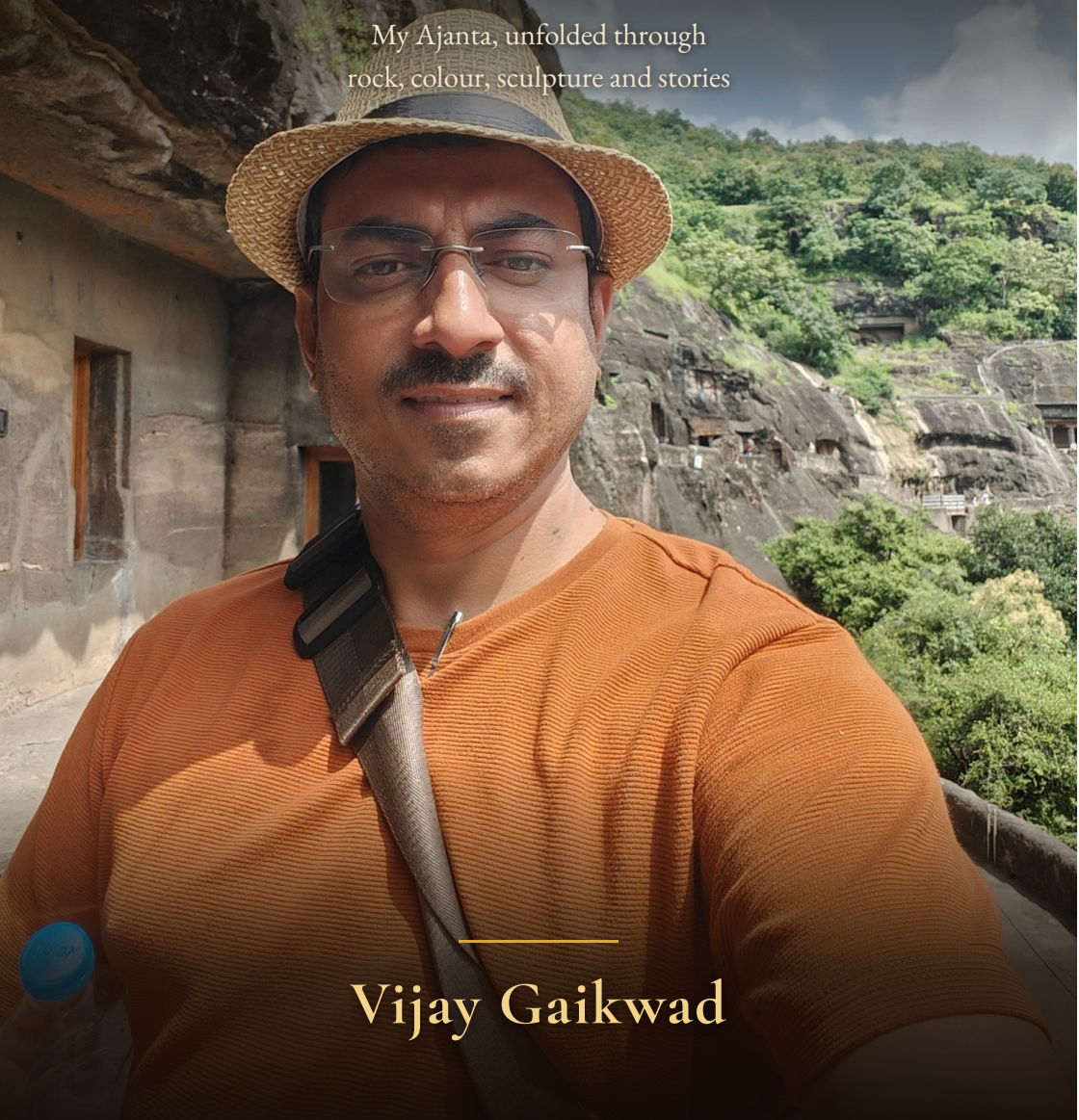


AJANTA CAVES, MAHARASHTRA · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE

AJANTA

As I Understood It

My Ajanta, unfolded through
rock, colour, sculpture and stories



Vijay Gaikwad

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KRISHI PARVA

Ajanta, As I Understood It

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PART

1

Towards Ajanta



*A visit put off for years, the green of September,
and a gorge that had waited two thousand years.*

A day like any other. In September 2026.

But for me it was not like any other. A visit that had been put off for years was to happen that day. To Ajanta. Year after year I had said, “I must go some time,” and each time Ajanta had been pushed back to next time. That morning it was not going to be pushed back again.

I set out from Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar in my good friend Sharad Bhingare’s car. The road runs through Sillod towards Jalgaon. September had turned the whole countryside green. The green slid past the window, and a hundred kilometres ahead, in a gorge, two thousand years stood waiting.

I had read about that gorge, and heard about it. The Waghora river bends there like a horseshoe. On that bend stands a sheer cliff of rock,

as tall as a building of twenty or twenty-five storeys. And in the belly of that cliff, thirty caves. In the second century BCE someone struck the first chisel blow there. The monks needed shelter in the months of the rains. Over the centuries that followed, the cliff was carved. And then it was painted.

Those colours. The red and the yellow of ochre. The green of earth. The white of lime. The black of lampblack. And the blue of a stone that had come from the mountains of far-off Afghanistan. With no more colours than these, nameless painters raised palaces on the walls, planted forests, led out processions. Dancers, merchants, monks, elephants, deer, geese. And Bodhisattvas with eyelids lowered in compassion. Fifteen hundred years later those colours are still on the walls.

Then, at some point, all of it stopped. The chisel stopped, the brush stopped, and the caves slipped out of human memory. In 1819 British officers out hunting tiger caught sight of that cliff, and the world found Ajanta again.

All this I knew. Now I wanted to see it.

The car stopped at Ajanta. The last stretch, up to the gate of the caves, was by ST bus. The bus moved forward, and the longing of all those years gathered itself into those few minutes.

At the gate I found a guide. Abdul Nasir Mohammadi. He had a torch in his hand. Whatever lay inside in the dark would be lit by its beam. From there on it was his voice, the beam of his torch, and my eyes.



At the entrance to the Ajanta
Caves, with the ST bus behind.

This narrative speaks through three voices. The first is mine: what I saw. The second is Mohammadi's: what he recounted. He spoke, and I listened. The third is that of the books. On my return I opened them and checked every statement I had heard against them.

The three voices did not always agree. Often Mohammadi and the books say the same thing. Sometimes they differ. Where they differ, I have set down both. I have not taken Mohammadi's account as historical evidence. But my Ajanta began in his voice, and so I have not erased that voice either.



PART

2

My Guide and I, Abdul Nasir Mohammadi



*A torch in his hand, stories on his tongue. A man who
shows you where to stand first, and the painting after.*

Mohammadi had a torch in his hand. In its beam he showed me the paintings one by one. Where the beam stopped, my gaze stopped. Now and then I asked a question, and he answered.

Mohammadi shows the place first, then the painting. In Cave 1, in front of Padmapani, he made me stop at a certain spot. “Stand here and look at his face.” Then he said, “Now go to the corner. Look from there.” The painting was the same. The place I was looking from had changed.



With my guide, Abdul Nasir Mohammadi.

His second habit is comparison with the world of today. In the costumes of the dancers in the Mahajanaka Jataka he sees a Punjabi suit. In the garments of the servants carrying water, Bermudas. In the bun of the woman on the door-frame, an air hostess's hairdo. In the patterns of the ceiling, the border of a Paithani sari, a Solapuri chaddar, a Himroo shawl.

These comparisons are not to be taken as a history of costume. They are marks a guide has set up so that a painting fifteen hundred years old may feel familiar to the eyes of today. I have kept them just as they are, as Mohammadi's comparisons.

In Cave 2, on the pedestal of Hariti's shrine, a classroom is carved. There Mohammadi warmed to his subject. "The clever children

always on the front bench. The naughty ones on the back bench. Just like a classroom today. Nothing has changed, even now.”

The joke is not his alone, as I learned later. The Archaeological Survey’s guidebook describes the same sculpture: three children are writing, the teacher has raised his stick, two boys are boxing, five are setting rams to fight. And for those naughty children even the government booklet uses the very word “back-benchers”.

He had told me about the colours before we even entered the cave. Inside I asked: are these colours made from vegetables or plants? “No. I told you outside, didn’t I? Oxide colours, mineral colours.” The list of pigments in the books says the same: ochre, green earth, lime, lampblack, and the blue lapis lazuli that came from far away.

One more thing about him. What he does not know, he says he does not know. I asked who the artists were. His answer was: “Nobody knows that.” Before a damaged painting he said: “Nobody has identified this one.”

When I checked against the books, his account turned out different in a few places. He put the Jataka tales at five hundred and fifty-three; the Pali collection has five hundred and forty-seven. He said the meaning of Mayadevi’s dream was explained by the sage Asita; in the guidebook it is Brahmins who do so. The sinking ship in Cave 1 he assigned to the Mahajanaka Jataka; researchers have identified it as belonging to another story altogether. All this will come later, each at its own wall.



PART

3

A History Hidden in the Rock



Two phases, a silence of four centuries between them, and caves found again on a tiger hunt.

Ajanta was not carved at a single stretch. It was made in two phases, and between the two lies a silence of about four centuries.

The oldest cave is Cave 10. On its façade is the inscription of a donor named Vasithiputa Katahadi, and the script places it in the second century BCE. This first group has six caves. Caves 9 and 10 are chaityagrihas, that is, prayer halls with a stupa. Caves 8, 12, 13 and 15A are viharas, that is, dwellings for the monks.

There is no image of the Buddha in these old caves. In those days the convention was not to show the Buddha in human form. For worship there was only the stupa. The Buddha figures seen today outside Cave 9 were carved in a later age.



Caves cut one after another into the cliff.

Nobody knows on whose initiative the work began. Ajanta is part of the same Buddhist movement that produced the caves at Bhaja, Kondane, Pitalkhora and Nashik. In Cave 12 an inscription records the gift of a merchant named Ghanamadada. The inscriptions of this first phase carry no king's name.

Mohammadi called this period Hinayana. He also said that no pillars were carved in those caves. For the viharas that is true; the halls of Caves 12 and 13 have no pillars. In the chaityagrihas, however, there are rows of them: twenty-three in Cave 9, thirty-nine in Cave 10.

Then, for about four centuries, the chisel stopped.

When it was taken up again, the Vakatakas of Vatsagulma were ruling. Cave 16 was the gift of Varahadeva, minister of the Vakataka king Harishena. Cave 17 was given by one of Harishena's feudatory princes. Now a sanctum appeared in the back wall of the vihara, and

in it a grand image of the Buddha. On the stupa of the chaityagriha, too, the Buddha appeared.

Scholars do not agree on exactly when Harishena lived. The Archaeological Survey's guidebook takes his reign as about 475 to 500 CE, and places the main activity at Ajanta between the latter half of the fifth century and the first half of the sixth. In the view of the scholar Walter Spink, Harishena reigned from about 460 to 477, and most of the work of the second phase was done in barely twenty years. I do not pass judgement. I record both.

According to Mohammadi the early paintings were simple and had mistakes in them, and by the end of the fifth century the artists had gained mastery. The guidebook says otherwise: even the paintings in Caves 9 and 10, from before the Common Era, show remarkable maturity, and long practice must lie behind them.

In the seventh century the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) wrote down a description of a vihara in the hills on the eastern side of Maharashtra: halls cut into the cliff, scenes from the life of the Buddha on the walls, stone elephants outside the gate. At Ajanta there are such elephants at the foot of Cave 16. A Rashtrakuta inscription near Cave 26 tells us that people still came and went here in the eighth and ninth centuries. On the centuries after that, the guidebook I have is silent.

In 1819 a party of British officers out hunting tiger came upon these caves. Then the copying of the paintings began. Griffiths, Lady Herringham, Ghulam Yazdani: volume followed volume. In the course of the copying, varnish was laid on the paintings. In 1920 Italian conservators applied a thick coat of shellac over those old layers. In

time it darkened. In 1983 Ajanta was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List.



The gorge of Ajanta in the mid-nineteenth century. Lithograph from James Fergusson's *Illustrations of the Rock-Cut Temples of India* (1845).

The history is not yet complete. Between 1999 and 2001 there were excavations on the right bank of the Waghora. The remains of a vihara of burnt brick came to light, along with a silver coin of the Kshatrappa king Vishvasena, and a gold coin of the Byzantine emperor Theodosius II. On the bank facing the cliff, too, someone was living.



PART

4

From the Waghora Gorge to the World of the Buddha



*Rock sixty-five million years old,
and the chisel that went into it.*

The caves of Ajanta are in a sheer cliff. The cliff is about seventy-six metres high and semicircular. At its foot lies the narrow, winding gorge of the Waghora river. The row of caves, curving like a horseshoe, stretches for more than five hundred and fifty metres. At the head of the gorge, beyond Cave 28, the Waghora comes down in seven leaps. That waterfall is called Sat Kund.

No one knows who chose this place, but whoever it was understood nature. The caves were for the monks' varshavasa, the Buddhist practice of spending the months of the rains in one place. And it is in the rains that this gorge is at its greenest, the river at its fullest.



The curving gorge, and the caves in the cliff.

On that September day the green was there before me. The monks must have seen this very gorge in this very season.

The path that links the caves today is modern. In ancient times each cave had its own stairway up from the river. As the façades of the caves collapsed, most of the stairways went too; a little is left of the ones at Caves 16 and 17.

The layout of the caves was not planned in advance. They were cut at different times, and so their floors are not on one level. Cave 8 is the lowest, Cave 29 the highest. Nor do the numbers follow chronology; they were given for convenience, starting from one end. That is why Cave 1 was not the first to be cut, and Cave 10 is the oldest.



The modern path that links the caves.

In a large, unfinished cave Mohammadi drew my attention to the rock. “Look at the lava in the rock here. The flow of the lava. The hardness of the rock.”

This cliff is a slice of the Deccan plateau itself. About sixty-five million years ago basalt lava came out through fissures in the earth and piled up, layer upon layer. Those horizontal layers can still be seen on the wall of the gorge. Geologists call this lava “pahoehoe”: lava whose surface is coiled like rope. As it cooled, round gas cavities were left in it, and later these filled with whitish minerals. The flow of lava that Mohammadi pointed out matches this description.

The unfinished caves reveal how the cutting was done. First the outline was marked. Excavation began at the ceiling, and the ceiling was finished first. Then, with heavy tools like the pickaxe, the cutters

worked downwards, driving deep trenches, breaking away the ridges between them, and leaving blocks of stone wherever pillars were wanted. The floor came last of all. The fine work and the carving were done with hammer and chisel.

The order, too, was fixed: first the façade and the verandah, then the hall, and after that the sanctum and the cells. Traces of painting are found even in unfinished caves. So the chisel and the brush must have been at work at the same time.

This is what Mohammadi had shown me in that unfinished cave: two pillars complete, carving on the middle pillar, and the rest still in the rough. The work still stands exactly where it stopped.

Rock sixty-five million years old, and a chisel that went into it two thousand years ago.



PART

5

The Caves, One After Another



*Thirty caves, the beam of a torch, and
a different story behind every door.*

There are thirty caves at Ajanta, counting the unfinished ones. Five of them are chaityagrihas, the rest viharas. If time is short one should see at least eight, the Archaeological Survey's guidebook suggests: Caves 1, 2, 9, 10, 16, 17, 19 and 26.

I saw these caves one after another. Mohammadi spoke, I listened. The beam of his torch went ahead and I followed.

Cave 1. A verandah, behind it a hall of twenty pillars, fourteen cells around it, and straight ahead, in the sanctum, the Buddha preaching. Beneath his seat a wheel and two deer: the sign of the first sermon at Sarnath. Every inch of this cave was once painted, even the pillars and the sculptures. Much has now flaked away, but what remains gives an idea of the former splendour.



The caves seen from across the gorge.

Mohammadi's beam went first to the left wall. A royal court, a dance, a king setting out for the forest: the Mahajanaka Jataka. Then to the back wall, where two Bodhisattvas stand, one on each side of the sanctum: Padmapani and Vajrapani. These two have pages of their own further on. Then the beam went up. On the ceiling, panel after panel: flowers, fruit, birds, an elephant, a running bull, and foreign guests holding cups of wine. Mohammadi said this was the Persian king. The guidebook does not accept that identification. That story, too, will come later.

Then he pointed to the capital of a pillar. Four deer, and one head between the four of them. Look at any one deer, and the head seems to be its own. Lastly, on the wall near the door, King Sibi: a pigeon on his lap, a pair of scales beside him.

Cave 2 is like Cave 1, but smaller. Twelve pillars, ten cells. Here Mohammadi's very first sentence was one of regret. "The elephant here is damaged. Only a little of the white elephant is left." It is the elephant of Mayadevi's dream. Beside it, the interpretation of the dream, the birth at Lumbini, Indra holding the newborn child in his hands.



Rows of Buddhas in Cave 2.
Photograph published in 1933.

On the walls of this cave are row upon row of Buddhas. Mohammadi called them the "Thousand Buddhas", and here the book is on his side: a painted inscription on the wall records the gift of a thousand painted Buddhas. Some of the paintings look fresh, some darkened. "A

painting that has turned black is not ruined. It can be cleaned,” said Mohammadi.

In the shrine to the right of the sanctum sit Hariti and her consort; in the shrine to the left, two corpulent Yakshas. On the right wall, the Naga princess Irandati, seated on a swing. “This is the picture you see in books and on postcards,” said Mohammadi. And the ceiling. The ceiling of this cave has largely survived. On the ceiling of one shrine there is a row of twenty-three geese, each goose in a different pose.

Cave 4 is the largest vihara at Ajanta. And unfinished. A hall of twenty-eight pillars. The frame of the main doorway is crowded with carving: women standing under trees, couples, flying figures. Mohammadi pointed out the buns in the women’s hair. To the right of the door is a sculpture of Avalokiteshvara. Around him, people caught in peril stand with folded hands. “When animals come after them in the forest, when demons come after them, the Bodhisattvas save people,” said Mohammadi. The books list these Eight Great Perils: lion, elephant, fire, snake, thief, water, fetters and demon. Inside, before the sanctum, stand six Buddhas. Two of them are only half carved.

Cave 6 has two storeys. In Cave 7 I saw the Miracle of Shravasti carved in stone: countless forms of the one Buddha. In Cave 2 Mohammadi had already told me I would see this again in Cave 7.

In Caves 9 and 10 I saw the oldest face of Ajanta. A long hall, a rounded back, a vaulted ceiling, and at the far end a stupa. No image of the Buddha. The ceiling once had wooden beams and rafters. They were not needed; the stone bore its own weight. Yet construction in wood was imitated exactly. The beams have gone; their sockets remain.

Cave 10 has thirty-nine octagonal pillars, and on its walls the oldest paintings at Ajanta: the Shyama Jataka, and the Chhaddanta Jataka, the story of the elephant with six tusks. I saw names and scratches drawn across those paintings by people of later times.

I saw the cells in Caves 12 and 13. They are narrow. Each has two stone beds, and one even has a stone pillow. Monks slept here.

Cave 16 is Varahadeva's. At its foot I saw two stone elephants, and a Naga king seated on his coils. Inside, the Buddha sits with his legs hanging down. On the left wall I saw a princess swooning at the sight of the crown in a servant's hands. She is Sundari, the wife of Nanda. The Buddha made Nanda a monk, and the crown he had taken off came home.

In Cave 17 I saw the greatest number of paintings. This is where they have survived best at Ajanta. In the verandah, an enormous wheel: the Wheel of Life. Over the door, the seven Manushi Buddhas and the eighth, the one to come, Maitreya. Inside, the Vessantara Jataka, Simhala's ship and the island of the ogresses, a woman adorning herself. And one quiet scene: Yashodhara pushes Rahula forward, and the Buddha holds out his begging bowl to him.

Cave 19 is small, but in its proportions it is held to be the finest at Ajanta. Here I saw the Buddha standing on the stupa. On the façade, a great arched window, Yakshas on either side of it, and figures of the Buddha all over the wall. In Cave 2 Mohammadi had said I would see the Thousand Buddhas again in Cave 19. To one side, a Naga couple seated on the rock.

Cave 26 is larger and more richly decorated. The monk Buddhahadra gave it. On the left wall I saw the reclining Buddha.

Between two sal trees, lying on his right side: the Mahaparinirvana. Below, the disciples in mourning; above, the gods. On the same wall, the Victory over Mara: the Buddha beneath the Bodhi tree, touching the earth; on one side Mara advancing on his elephant, on the other Mara in retreat.



The façade of Cave 26.

Beyond it are Caves 28 and 29, both unfinished and today all but inaccessible.

Thirty caves, and so many of them left half done. In the finished caves the stories are on the walls. In the unfinished caves the story has stayed inside the rock.



PART

6

Architecture Raised from the Rock



*Prayer halls and viharas that rose without
one stone being laid upon another.*

Nothing at Ajanta is built. The craftsmen did not set a single stone upon another. What is there is what was left when everything unwanted had been taken away from one single rock. A pillar is rock left uncarved. The ceiling is the hill left as it was above. The stupa, the image of the Buddha, the stone beds of the monks: all are limbs of that one cliff.

In this rock there are only two kinds of structure. One for prayer, one for living.

The structure for prayer is the chaityagriha. There are five of them at Ajanta. On the façade is a great horseshoe-shaped window that lets the light in. Within is a long hall, with a row of pillars down either side

that curves round at the far end. At the centre of that curve, the stupa. Behind the pillars runs a passage, for circumambulation. Above, a vaulted ceiling, like a boat turned upside down.

In Caves 9 and 10 the stupa is plain: a round dome, a square harmika above it, and on that, once, umbrellas of wood. The ceiling had wooden beams. The stone remembered wood. By the time we come to Cave 19, six or seven centuries have passed. The plan of the building has stayed the same. But now the beams are carved in the stone itself, three umbrellas one above another on the stupa almost touch the ceiling, and in front of the stupa stands the Buddha. In Cave 26 he is seated in a pavilion, and the stupa has moved behind him. Where once there was only a sign, there is now a face.

The structure for living is the vihara. The old viharas were simple: a square hall, no pillars, narrow cells on three sides. The later viharas gained a verandah, a pillared hall and, in the back wall facing the door, a sanctum with a grand image of the Buddha in it. The vihara was now both dwelling and temple.

In the hall of Cave 2 Mohammadi was explaining. "This is the assembly hall. Every cave has one. Cells all around, ten of them here. In the morning the monks would sit here in the middle and recite." He told me how small the cells are, too: seven feet by seven. In Cave 4 he said: "In the beginning they cut a cave ten feet by ten. Later, this big." By his account that hall is eighty feet by eighty. I did not find that measurement in the books. But a hall of twenty-eight pillars is not a small one.

The pillars. There are six in the verandah of Cave 1, and they are not all alike. The base is square, with little Ganas at its four corners.

The shafts of the two middle pillars are first octagonal, then sixteen-sided, then fluted. Between these, delicate bands of ornament. On the capitals, couples in flight bearing garlands. Inside the hall, on one capital, is that single head of the four deer. In Cave 17 the same trick with lions: eight lions seated back to back, and four heads. The sculptors were playing with the viewer.



By the pillars of a cave verandah.

The doors. On the frame, bands of flowers, couples, Nagas, and in the upper corners women standing on makaras beneath trees. “These celestial women are always on the door-frame,” said Mohammadi. “At Ellora you will see Ganga and Yamuna in this same place.”

And the light. It comes only from the front: through the door, through the windows. The deeper one goes into the hall, the thinner it grows. The sanctum is innermost, in the deepest dark. When Mohammadi's beam reached it, the colours that still cling to the body of the Buddha came into view.

In the seventh century Xuanzang wrote of such a vihara: its halls stand with their backs to the cliff and their faces to the gorge. Nearly fourteen hundred years later that description needs no changing.



PART

7

When the Colours Began to Speak



A torch came on in the dark, and the wall woke up.

When you step into a cave from the light outside, your eyes take a few moments to get used to the dark. You can tell there are walls. You can tell, too, that there is something on them. But what, you cannot tell.

Then Mohammadi switched on his torch, and the wall woke up.

In the circle of the beam, colour came first. The coppery red of ochre. Brown. A yellowish tone. Here and there the white of lime. And in one corner, suddenly, blue. “Look at this blue. How brilliant it is,” said Mohammadi. Fifteen hundred years on, the colour is as fresh as if it had been put on yesterday.

After the colours came shapes, and after the shapes, people. On the left wall of Cave 1 a royal court was in session. In the middle, a dancer. Around her, girls playing drums and flutes. Mohammadi’s beam

paused on one face after another. “Look at these girls. They’re whispering to each other: what’s going to happen now?” Then the queen. “Look at her body language. She is trying to win the king round.” Then a servant standing at the great gate, looking on in wonder. Then a man blowing a conch. “Look at his puffed cheeks. His eyes wide open.”

I went on looking. There was no sound on the wall, yet the conch was sounding.

The walls of Ajanta do not show the Buddha alone. The whole world around him is there. Palace, court, market, village, hermitage. King and slave. Rich man and beggar. Saint and sinner. Love, jealousy, joy, grief, victory, poverty. The clothes, ornaments, instruments, vessels and weapons of that age. The stories are of the Buddha and of his former births, but in telling them the painters painted the world that lay before their own eyes. What the elder monks taught their disciples could be seen here, on the wall.

Look up, and the story ends and the ornament begins. On the ceiling, panel after panel. Flowers, creepers, fruit, birds, animals, and now and then a comic figure. The ceiling of Cave 2 has largely survived. “The painting on the ceiling is still intact,” said Mohammadi. “Look at this pattern, still fresh.” In his view this same pattern has passed into today’s carpets and textiles.

He also told me how it was painted. First the wall was deliberately left rough. Over it, a plaster of mud. Then the drawing. “For the outline they used two colours: black and dark brown. Then they filled in whatever colours they wanted.” The books add one thing to this. The colours are not merely filled in. Darker and lighter shades of the

same colour give the body its roundness. On the nose and lips of the dark-skinned woman beside Padmapani there is a light touch of bright colour. Because of that one touch, the face comes forward out of the wall.



A painted Buddha on a pillar in Cave
2. Photograph published in 1933.

In Cave 2 Mohammadi summed up the colours in a single sentence. “Black, white, brown, mostly. Blue only outside, on the ceiling.” Blue was costly. It had come from far away, and in the old paintings, from before the Common Era, it is not there at all.

Not all the paintings have survived alike. Some are bright even today. Some have darkened. In some places only the plaster is left, and in some not even that. Every inch of Cave 1 was once painted: walls,

ceiling, pillars, even the sculptures. What we see today are fragments of that splendour.

When the torch goes off, the wall goes back into the dark. The colours stay where they are.



PART

8

Through the Eyes of Padmapani



*Three places to stand, one painting, and
a face that looks different each time.*

In Cave 1, at the very back of the hall, to the left of the sanctum, is the painting that comes to mind the moment Ajanta is named. It is the one on the covers of books, grown as familiar as a postage stamp. For years I had seen it in print. Now it was on the wall, and I was in front of it.

Mohammadi lifted the beam. “The finest painting of Ajanta is here. The Bodhisattva Padmapani. Padma means lotus, pani means hand. The one with a lotus in his hand.”

A figure larger than a man. On the head, a tall jewelled crown. Strings of pearls round the neck. Broad shoulders, a tapering waist. In the right hand a flower, held in fingers so light that it seems it might fall. And the face. Slightly inclined, calm, the eyelids lowered.

“The lotus means peace and purity,” said Mohammadi. “Look at the expression on the face. How calm.” Then his beam travelled along the curve of the body. “Look at the bend in the body. Tribhanga. Bent in three places.” One at the neck, a second at the waist, a third at the knee. Because of those three bends the standing figure does not seem stiff. It seems to be breathing.

Around him, too, there is a world. Beside him, his consort: dark, a similar flower in her hand, a light touch of bright colour on her nose and lips. Between the two, an attendant in a long blue coat, waving a fly-whisk. Beyond, a dark mace-bearer in a white coat; Mohammadi called him the bodyguard. In the upper corner, flying Gandharvas and musicians. In the other corner, monkeys, peacocks, and a happy couple. In those dark and fair figures Mohammadi read a meaning: “In Buddhism there is no distinction of colour, no distinction of caste.”

Mohammadi called the flower in the hand a lotus. The Archaeological Survey’s guidebook calls it a lily. The name, all the same, comes from the lotus. This Bodhisattva’s other name is Avalokiteshvara: he who looks upon the world with compassion. Both names appear under the pictures in the guidebook.

Then Mohammadi taught me how to look at the painting.

“Stand here.” I stood facing the painting. “Look at his face. He is looking at you. Both shoulders are in one line.”

“Now move to the corner. Look from there.” I moved. “From here his face has turned to this side. This shoulder has gone up. The far one a little down.”

Then a third place. “From here the face looks turned fully to the right. Now this shoulder is up, that one down.”

The painting had not moved. I had moved. Yet from each place he looked different. In front of that wall I felt for myself the difference between looking at a painting straight on and looking at the same painting from a few steps to one side.

“This is a 3-D painting,” said Mohammadi. “It is compared with the Mona Lisa. The Mona Lisa is five hundred years old. This painting is fifteen hundred years old. Before the Mona Lisa, this was done at Ajanta.” The comparison is his. I did not find it in the art history books. The books use other words: shading, highlight, roundness. And there is one sentence that has stayed with me as firmly as the wall: these Bodhisattvas are immense in size yet weightless, dissolved in compassion and, with lowered eyelids, sunk into their own depths.

Mohammadi says he is looking at you. The book says he is looking within himself. When you stand before the painting, this does not feel like a contradiction.

I asked: who painted this? “Nobody knows,” said Mohammadi. “It is a unique painting, made by the nameless painters of Ajanta.”

Fifteen hundred years ago someone stood before this dark wall with a brush in his hand. We shall never know his name. The eyelids he painted, though, are lowered still.



PART

9

The Power of Vajrapani



*The filigree of a crown, Krishnakumari,
and the unsettled question of a name.*

From in front of Padmapani I moved a few steps to the right. On the other side of the sanctum door, at the same height and on the same scale, stood a second Bodhisattva.

“A Bodhisattva always stands beside the Buddha,” said Mohammadi. “And this is the second: Vajrapani. Padmapani and Vajrapani are the finest paintings in Cave 1.”

The two paintings are side by side, but their temperaments differ. Padmapani is turned inward, calm. This one’s face has a different expression. “Vajrapani means power. Strength. Energy,” said Mohammadi. “You can see that power right there in his face.”

Then his beam went to the crown and stayed there. “Look at the detail of the crown.” That crown is a painting in its own right. Tier

upon tier, gems set into it, strings of pearls, fine filigree. The painter has done a goldsmith's work with a brush. The beam came down. "Earrings. Necklace. Armlets. Bangles." Each ornament can be told apart. Pointing to the pattern of the garment below the waist, Mohammadi said: "This design would work in today's fashion."

The Archaeological Survey's guidebook also stops at this crown and says its ornamentation catches the eye. The Bodhisattva stands leaning on a figure in a long coat. Beside him a king has come with flowers on a tray. And below, at the foot of the painting, two dark women. Only their upper bodies survive. One is offering flowers to the other.

"This is his wife," said Mohammadi. "Krishnakumari. The black princess of Ajanta." In the books she is known as the "Dark Princess". Her features are extremely delicate and finely drawn, the guidebook says. It does not say, however, that she is the Bodhisattva's wife.

One thing must be recorded about the name as well. Mohammadi called this painting Vajrapani, and most guides and most popular books say the same. The Archaeological Survey's guidebook, however, gives this painting no name. It says only: "another Bodhisattva." Vajrapani means he who holds the vajra, the thunderbolt, in his hand. The vajra the guidebook does point to is inside, in the sanctum.

So I looked inside.

The Buddha sits in the sanctum, majestic, carved in stone, both hands at his chest in the gesture of teaching. "Padmasana, and the teaching mudra," said Mohammadi. Beneath the seat, a wheel and two deer. Beside the deer, five monks: the first five disciples, who heard the first sermon at Sarnath. On either side of the Buddha stand two

attendants waving fly-whisks, laden with ornaments, their locks falling to one side. The one on the right holds a three-pronged vajra in his left hand. There is no doubt that he is Vajrapani.

“In Hinduism there is the Trimurti: Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh,” said Mohammadi. “In Buddhism, Padmapani, the Buddha in the middle, and Vajrapani. This is the Trimurti of Buddhism.” The word Trimurti is his. The arrangement, though, is real, and it is not confined to one cave. In Cave 17, in Cave 4, these same two stand on either side of the Buddha.

Compassion on one side. Power on the other. And between the two, seated in calm, the Buddha teaching.



PART

10

The Jataka Stories



*Mahajanaka's ship, Sibi's scales,
and Irandati on her swing.*

The Buddha did not become the Buddha in a single life. Before that he was born countless times: now as a king, now as a merchant, now as an elephant, a deer, a monkey, a goose. In each birth he brought one virtue to perfection: giving, forgiveness, renunciation, truth. The stories of these former births are the Jataka tales. The walls of Ajanta are filled with them.

“There are five hundred and fifty-three Jataka stories of the Buddha’s former births. In human form, in animal form,” said Mohammadi. The Pali collection counts five hundred and forty-seven. The figure may shift a little this way or that; the story on the wall does not change. “All that time he was a Bodhisattva,” he told me. “In the

last birth Siddhartha attained enlightenment. Then he became the Buddha.”

The first story began on the left wall of Cave 1.

“It starts here. A palace scene. The Buddha was a king then. His name was Mahajanaka. His wife’s name, Sivali.” The beam was on the king, seated in a pavilion. “But the king is not happy. He wants to become a monk.” The beam moved to the right. There a dance was in progress. “Sivali arranged this dance to change his mind. The girls are playing drums, playing flutes. She wants to bind him to worldly life.” But the king’s face shows no pleasure in the dance. The painter has painted him that way on purpose.

The beam climbed. “Above, the forest. A teacher lived there. The king is listening to his sermon.” Mohammadi showed me where part of the king’s face has flaked off. “The sermon was so powerful that even two deer have stopped to listen. Here the king resolved to become a monk.”

But the story does not end there. The king returns to the palace. Sivali tries again. The maids whisper among themselves. And at last the king leaves. “Now he’s riding away on horseback. This is the palace gate. This servant is looking on in amazement. The queen came too, but she didn’t go with him.” The beam moved on. A river. A boat. And then a sinking ship. “The ship is sinking. People are drowning. You can see fish too. In this story King Mahajanaka survived.”

The scenes are not in sequence, as Mohammadi himself told me. “The first part goes from left to right. The next from right to left. There are the doors of the cells in between, you see. They adjusted to the space.” At the very top, in a wooden pavilion, water is being

poured over the king's head. "Purification with holy water before becoming a monk. Look at the blue here." And right in the corner, the last picture. "Saffron robes. A begging bowl in his hand. King Mahajanaka has become a monk."

I read that wall as a single story. From the court to the begging bowl.

Later, when I opened the books, I found another story on that wall. In the Jataka, Mahajanaka's ship is wrecked before he becomes king, not after. He is a young man setting out to trade, and a goddess lifts him out of the sea and brings him to Mithila. Whose, then, is the ship on the wall? A German scholar spotted a small figure beneath that scene: a man with a bandage over his eyes. That is the mark of another story altogether. A generous prince named Kalyanakarin and his wicked younger brother go on a sea voyage in search of treasure. The ship sinks. The prince saves his brother. And out of greed for the jewels that same brother puts out the eyes of the sleeping prince.

Two readings of one wall. Mohammadi's, in which a king leaves everything and goes. And the scholars', in which that wall belongs to two or three stories and some parts have yet to be identified at all. The Archaeological Survey's guidebook itself admits as much: the identification of this wall has not been satisfactory.

The second story is near the door, on the front wall. "This one is badly damaged," said Mohammadi. "King Sibi. You can see his face and crown." Sibi was exceedingly generous. To test him, Indra and Agni came in the form of birds. One became a pigeon and settled on the king's lap. The other became a bird of prey and came after it. If the pigeon's life was to be saved, the hunter had to be given his prey. The

king called for scales. “He is standing beside the scales. He cut his own flesh. Look at the right thigh. Red colour. Blood.” The beam had stopped on that red.

The pigeon on the lap, the king at the scales: the books also record these two episodes. They add one detail. This story of the pigeon is not in the Pali Jataka. It comes from the Mahabharata and from Sanskrit Buddhist literature. The Sibi of the Pali Jataka makes a different gift: his own eyes, to a blind Brahmin. That story is painted in Cave 17, and there the name is written beneath the painting in three places: Sibiraja.

The third story is in Cave 2. “The story of the Naga people, from the Jataka,” said Mohammadi. “This is the Naga king’s wife. And this is their daughter, playing: Princess Irandati.” A young woman seated on a swing. This is the picture printed in books and on postcards, Mohammadi said. In his telling a prince sees her in the garden, falls in love, marries her, and then the Naga people invite the Buddha to preach.

The story in the book is more intricate, and more entertaining. Irandati’s suitor is not a prince. He is a Yaksha general named Punnaka. Her mother, the Naga queen, wants one thing only: to hear a discourse by Vidhurapandita, the wise minister of the king of Indraprastha. That minister is the Bodhisattva of that birth. Punnaka goes to Indraprastha, plays dice with the king, wins the minister himself in the game, and brings him back. All this is on the wall: the swing, the dice-board, the court of the Naga king, the discourse, and at last the wedding.

In the other caves there are stories from the animal births. The elephant with six tusks, who helps the hunter who has come to kill him saw off his own tusks. The king of the monkeys, who makes a bridge of his body and takes his troop across the river. The golden goose, who preaches to the king and queen. Prince Vessantara, who gives away the elephant, the chariot, the horses, and at last even his children.

One thread runs through all these stories. Someone gives away something of his own. A kingdom, flesh, eyes, tusks, life. “Many times he offered up his life, left the world. Then he became the Buddha,” said Mohammadi. The paintings on the wall are the stages of that long journey.



PART

11

Kings, Queens, Dancers and Ordinary People



*On the walls of Ajanta there
are more people than Buddhas.*

Who appears most on the walls of Ajanta? Not the Buddha. People.

The stories are religious, but they take place in a crowd of people. And everyone in that crowd is doing something. In the court in Cave 1 the queen sits leaning against the king, and a maid is pressing her feet. In a hut below the pavilion a woman is pounding a cosmetic paste. In another painting a dejected princess is talking to her companion. Beside her a maid stands holding a tray of cosmetics, and at the door stands a man in a long white coat, a staff in his hand, his face downcast. The bad news is written on his face.

The kings sit at ease on their thrones. Around them, ministers, fly-whisk bearers, bodyguards. But the painters seem less interested in the

kings than in the people around them. In Cave 17 a prince is distributing alms, and before him a crowd of beggars, supplicants and mendicants has gathered. Each face in that crowd is painted with a character of its own. In the same cave a maddened elephant is charging through the bazaar of Rajagriha. There are shops, and citizens fleeing in terror. In Cave 2 a woman on her knees is begging for mercy, and before her stands an enraged king with his sword raised. What became of her, the wall does not say. That part has flaked away.

And the women. The painters of Ajanta painted women in every state: dancing, playing an instrument, adorning themselves, whispering, weeping, swooning, praying. Sundari in Cave 16 swoons at the sight of her husband's crown. A woman in Cave 17 is absorbed in adorning herself. In the verandah of the same cave, among the Apsaras flying across the sky, one is playing a flute, and the painter has painted her from behind. To paint a figure from behind is not easy. He did it on purpose.

Mohammadi enjoyed pointing out the costumes and hairstyles of these women. At the scene of the dancers he said: "Look at these girls' clothes. Just like today's. A fifth-century Punjabi suit." At the servants carrying water: "Their lower garment is like today's Bermudas. This is fifth-century fashion." At the woman on the doorway of Cave 4: "Look at this bun. Air hostesses wear it just like this today."

A history of costume cannot be written from these comparisons. The name Punjabi suit belongs to today. But what Mohammadi was pointing out is truly there on the wall: clothes that fit the body, long coats, short garments, and so many hairstyles that one could make a list of them. The books call Ajanta an illustrated record of the

costume, jewellery, musical instruments, vessels and weapons of its age.

Music is everywhere. In the court, drums and flutes. At the palace gate, the conch. In the band above the door of Cave 1, seated couples are playing instruments. In Cave 16 there are musicians among the Ganas who bear the weight of the ceiling. In the sky, Gandharvas and Kinnaras: half human, half bird. Even in the oldest painting, in Cave 10, the king sets out to worship the Bodhi tree with soldiers, dancers and musicians in his train. A procession of two thousand years ago, and there is a band in it.

There are foreigners in this crowd too. Pointed caps, beards. There are dark people and fair. “In Buddhism all races are together,” Mohammadi had said. The diversity on the wall is real. What meaning to draw from it is left to the viewer.

When you see all this, one thing strikes you. These painters had looked at people very closely. How the neck turns in a whisper, how the shoulders droop on a man bringing bad news, how the cheeks swell when a conch is blown. The palaces are gone. The people are gone. Their necks, shoulders and cheeks have stayed on the wall.



PART

12

Animals, Plants and Nature



*Twenty-three geese, a running bull, and the
unsolved question of the fruit on the ceiling.*

Outside the cave was the green of September. Inside, on the walls and the ceiling, the green of fifteen hundred years ago.

The painters of Ajanta knew nature. Not from books; with their eyes. On their walls an elephant is not merely an elephant. He is wallowing with his herd in a lotus pond. Monkeys sit on a rock watching the fun below. The river is full of fish and water creatures. A pair of deer has stopped to gaze at an ascetic. In one corner of the Padmapani painting monkeys are at play and peacocks are perched. It is as if the forest, too, rejoiced in the Bodhisattva's peace.



The green of Ajanta in September.

The Jataka tales gave the painters this freedom, for the heroes of those stories are themselves animals. The elephant with six tusks. The golden deer, who carries a drowning man out of the water on his back. The elephant who bathes his blind mother. The buffalo who puts up with the mischievous monkey that torments him. The fish who, in a drought, asks for rain for his kin. In these paintings the bodies of the animals are animal, but the eyes are human.

On the ceiling this same nature spreads out as ornament. Mohammadi turned the beam upward. “The ceiling paintings are decorative. Look at the fruits here: custard apple, wood apple, papaya, banana, mango.” In the panels there were bunches of fruit, creepers and birds.

Farming is my subject. So I had to stop at this list. Banana and mango belong to this soil. So does the wood apple. But papaya and custard apple are both held to be native to the Americas, and are said to have reached India much later. How, then, do they come to be on a fifth-century ceiling? Either the fruits Mohammadi calls by these names are other fruits, or the history of these fruits is older than we suppose. I leave the question open here. The books I have say only “fruits” for the ceiling and name none.

The beam moved on. “This elephant. The emblem of India’s tourism department was taken from here.” That is Mohammadi’s account. I have not been able to confirm it independently. The elephant, though, is on the ceiling, and it is a handsome one.

Then the bull. “Look at this 3-D bull on the ceiling. It is running this way. Now go across to the other side. Look from there. It will seem to be coming at you again.” I went across, and looked up. The trick of Padmapani’s shoulders, here on the ceiling, in a bull.

In Cave 2, on the ceiling of one shrine, there is a row of twenty-three geese. Twenty-three geese, and each in a different pose. Whoever painted them had sat by a pond and watched geese.

The same observation is there in the stone. On the capital of a pillar in Cave 1 a fight between bulls is carved, and on the frieze of the verandah, fights of elephants and of buffaloes. On the doorway of Cave 15, a pair of pigeons. At the foot of Cave 16, the stone elephants. And that one head of the four deer.

Beside the real animals there are imaginary ones too. The makara: the mouth of a crocodile and the tail of a fish, from whose jaws arches and creepers spring. “This is a shardula,” said Mohammadi, “an

imaginary animal.” The Nagas are not snakes here. They are hooded kings, and outside Cave 19 one of them sits on the rock with his queen.

And the trees. At Ajanta the life of the Buddha unfolds under trees. When he is born, Maya stands holding the branch of a tree. He attains enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree. He passes away between two sal trees. In one cave seven Buddhas are painted in a row, and over the head of each is his own tree, with its name. And everywhere, the lotus: half and full on the pillars, in panels on the ceiling, in the pond at every stage from bud to full-blown flower.

When I came out of the cave, the same gorge lay before me again. Green. One need not ask where the painters found the forest they painted on the wall. It was right outside the door.



The gorge in front of the caves.



PART

13

The Colours and Painting Technique of Ajanta



The earth colours came from the gorge.

The blue came from Afghanistan.

The colours of Ajanta have come out of the ground. Not from flowers, not from leaves. I had asked Mohammadi exactly that, and his answer was firm: “Oxide colours. Mineral colours.” This is the first reason the paintings have lasted fifteen hundred years. Earth does not fade.

But before the colour, the wall. Colour does not take directly on bare rock. So the craftsmen did not smooth the wall. They deliberately left it rough, so that the plaster would grip. “First they made the wall rough. Then over it, a plaster of mud,” said Mohammadi.

That plaster is the earth of the gorge itself. Earth from the weathered black rock, with a trace of iron in it. Into it were mixed fine

grit from the rock, sand, rice husk, grass and plant fibres. These fibres keep the plaster from cracking as it dries. Mohammadi said there was cow dung in the mixture too, and that this is why insects go after these paintings. Dung is mentioned in many popular accounts. In the technical studies I have seen, it is not; they speak only of vegetable matter. The trouble from insects, however, is real.

Over this thick layer, a second, finer one. And over that, a thin wash of lime or white clay. Now the wall was white. Like paper.

Then the line. “Two colours for the outline: black and dark brown.” The painter first set out the whole scene in bold, unfaltering lines. Bold yet flawless: that is how the books describe the line. Then the colours were filled in, and darker and lighter shades of the same colour gave the bodies their roundness.

Glue was mixed into the colour so that it would hold to the wall. “This technique is tempera,” said Mohammadi, and here the books agree with him. Out of habit, people call these paintings “frescoes”. The word is in the very title of a famous book of a hundred years ago. But a fresco is a painting made on wet lime, before it dries. At Ajanta the painting was done after the plaster had dried. So the word is wrong here.

Now the colours, one by one.

Red and yellow. Both from ochre, that is, from earth rich in iron oxide. The coppery and brown shades come from it too. The blood on King Sibi’s thigh is of this red.

Green. Green earth, which is found in this very region. In the verandah of Cave 17 the two hands that hold up the Wheel of Life are green.

White. Lime, white clay, gypsum. And the most delicate work of this white: the highlight laid on the tip of the nose and on the lips.

Black. Lampblack, gathered over the flame of a lamp. The outlines are drawn with it.

All these colours the painters found in the gorge or around it. One they did not.

Blue. The powder of a stone called lapis lazuli. That stone is found in the mountains of Badakhshan in Afghanistan, and a recent study has traced the blue of Ajanta all the way there. It reached this gorge after a journey of fifteen hundred or two thousand kilometres. So it was costly, and so it was used with care. In Caves 16 and 17 it is confined to fine details. In Caves 1, 2 and 26 the hand grows freer. And in the old paintings of Caves 9 and 10 it is not there at all.

Mohammadi called it “Persian blue”. The stone is not from Persia. But Persia is indeed there in the name: the word “lazuli” comes from the Persian “lajward”. Names travel in just this way on the tongues of merchants.

The most surprising thing is that the blue has lasted best of all. The other colours have darkened in places, altered in places. The blue is as brilliant as ever. The guest who came from far away has outlasted his hosts.



PART

14

Light, Shadow and Rock



At Ajanta the light stops at the door. Beyond that, the torch.

At Ajanta the light stops at the door.

A cave is a room dug into a hill. It has only one open side: the front. The door, the windows on either side of it, and, in a chaityagriha, that great arched window above the door. These are the only ways for light to come in. In the verandah there is plenty of it. It reaches as far as the first pillars of the hall. Beyond that it grows thin, and at the back wall, where Padmapani stands, it has almost given out. The sanctum lies further back still.

That is why Mohammadi had a torch in his hand.

The beam of a torch is small. It shows one face at a time, one hand, one ornament. So a painting at Ajanta is never seen at a single glance. It unfolds piece by piece. As the beam moves, the story moves on. I think this must have been how these paintings were seen from the very

beginning. Fifteen hundred years ago some elder monk must have stood before this very wall with a lamp in his hand and, by its light, shown one episode after another as he told his disciples the Jatakas. Mohammadi was doing the same. Only the lamp had become a torch.



An image of the Buddha, lit up. On the pedestal, the wheel and the deer.

A harder question is that of the painters. A little light is enough to see by. Not to paint by. The filigree of the crown, the line of the eyelid, the highlight on the lip: how did they do this in such darkness? The books I have give no answer. There must have been lamps; that much one can guess. Lampblack, after all, was one of their colours.

And in that darkness they painted light. The figures of Ajanta are not flat, because on every body the painters laid darker and lighter

shades in such a way that light seems to fall on it from somewhere. A touch of bright colour on the nose, on the lips. In Cave 16 a circular pavilion is painted; it has depth, an inside and an outside. Where real light did not reach, they made light out of colour.

The games Mohammadi showed me one after another are a further turn of this same skill. Padmapani's face, which turns as you change your place. The bull on the ceiling, which comes at you from wherever you look. He stopped, too, at a Yaksha on one wall: "From this side he is looking at you. Now go to the other side." On the verandah ceiling of Cave 17 six figures are interlaced in such a way that each has only one arm, yet seems to have two. In stone, the same joke is in the one head of the four deer. All these are games played with the viewer's eye. The painter knew that the viewer would not stand in one place.

Sculpture needs a different light. Colour wants light from the front; stone wants it from the side, for sculpture is made by shadow. At Ajanta the façades, the verandahs and the door-frames are filled with carving: the façades of Caves 19 and 26, the verandah of Cave 1. There the light moves about all day, and as the sun shifts, the shadows of those figures shift with it.

And the rock. It is not smooth. Here and there it has cavities left by gas trapped as the lava cooled, like rough spots. On the bodies of the Naga couple outside Cave 19 they show clearly. Yet the peace on those two faces is not disturbed. The sculptor did not quarrel with the rock. In whatever rock he was given, he found the face.



The surface of the rock, up close.

On the way out of the cave, the light meets you again at the door. If you look back, you can see nothing inside.



PART

15

The Cultural Dialogue between India and Persia



The “Persian king” on the ceiling, the guests in pointed caps at the court, and the limits of the evidence.

Beneath the ceiling of Cave 1 Mohammadi’s beam stopped on one panel. “This is the sovereign king of Persia. The Persian king. The girls around him are from Persia too. The blue colour came from there.” A little later, at another panel: “See that Persian king again in the fourth panel. In the fifth century we had relations with Persia. Cultural relations. That is why their pictures are here.”

In those panels of the ceiling, people in foreign dress sit holding cups of wine. And in the same cave, on the wall to the right of the door, a great court is in session. The king sits at ease on a high-backed throne. From the right, guests are arriving: some outside the door, some on the threshold, some inside. On their heads are pointed caps;

some have beards. The three in front have come bearing gifts. One holds a string of pearls, the second what is probably a purse, the third a tray of jewellery.

For a long time an exciting identification clung to this scene. The king on the throne was the Chalukya emperor Pulakeshin II, and the guests were envoys sent by Khusrau II, the Sasanian emperor of Persia. In the drinking scenes on the ceiling, it was further said, are Khusrau himself and his beautiful queen Shirin. Mohammadi's "Persian king" comes down from this old identification.

The Archaeological Survey's guidebook rejects it, and the reason is simple. There is no record anywhere of the king of Persia sending envoys to the court of Pulakeshin. Besides, the dates do not match. Pulakeshin belongs to the seventh century. This cave is a hundred or a hundred and twenty-five years earlier. And everything on the walls of Ajanta is there for the instruction of Buddhists; there is no reason for a picture of contemporary politics to be among them. About the cups on the ceiling the guidebook is a little wry: drinking scenes are so common in Indian art that there is no need to summon the king and queen of Persia for them.

So there is no Persian king. But that is not to say there is no Persia at all.

Those caps and beards are real. The painter has deliberately shown that these people are not from the Deccan. In Cave 17, too, there are such foreigners in the crowd listening to the Buddha's sermon. The blue came from Afghanistan, and there is a Persian word in its name. On the wall of Cave 12 there is a stepped pattern which the books call "Assyrian in type". And on the far bank of the Waghora the

excavations turned up a gold coin of a fifth-century Byzantine emperor. A Byzantine coin, and the gorge of Ajanta.

Put all this together and the picture grows clear. This gorge was not cut off from the world. Goods came in, colours came in, coins came in, and the painters had seen those foreign faces. There is no doubt that there was a dialogue. But the evidence is too thin to say which country the man on the ceiling was king of, or whether he was a king at all.

This is how I understand what Mohammadi says: the name may be wrong, but the direction is right.



PART

16

The World of Hariti, Kubera and the Yakshas



*How an ogress who ate children became a
mother, and why she is fed in the vihara.*

In Cave 2, to the right of the sanctum, there is a small shrine. Inside, two figures sit side by side. One is a man, and beside him is a woman with a child on her lap.

“This is Kubera,” said Mohammadi. “Again an idea from Hinduism, here. The god of wealth and prosperity. A bag of money in his hand. And this is his wife Hariti, with a baby.”

Then he told her story. “Hariti had many children. Five hundred. And she was a cannibal.” She used to carry off the children of the people of Rajagriha and eat them. The Buddha decided to teach her a lesson. He hid the best loved of her five hundred children.

The beam went to the upper corner of the sculpture. “Look at this. The Buddha is seated, and she has come charging at him with a sword.” One child lost, and this is her state. What must have become of the mothers whose children she had eaten? That was the lesson. The beam went to the other corner. “Here he gives the baby back. But on one condition: from now on she will not kill children. Then she became the ideal mother.”

The books add an ending to this story, and it is the most beautiful part of it. Hariti asks the Buddha: what shall I and my children eat now? The Buddha gives her his word: in every vihara you will be given food. A Chinese pilgrim who came to India in the seventh century has recorded that he himself saw the custom of setting up an image of Hariti at the door or in the refectory of viharas. So she had her share in the vihara’s food.

The guidebook does not call the man beside her Kubera. It says only “Hariti’s consort”. But it does call a pot-bellied Yaksha in the verandah of the cave “the Buddhist form of Kubera”. Mohammadi’s name is not far off the mark.

The classroom is carved on the pedestal of this same shrine. “Afterwards she wanted to educate her children. She engaged a teacher,” said Mohammadi. A teacher with a stick, three children writing in front, at the back a scuffle and a ram fight. “And look at that boy in the corner. Farthest from the teacher. He is dancing with a handkerchief in his hand.” A mother of five hundred, and she faces the same question as any mother today: how will these children ever learn?

In the shrine opposite, on the left, sit two corpulent Yakshas. “A conch in the hand of one: Shankhanidhi. A lotus in the hand of the other: Padmanidhi,” said Mohammadi. “Their hairstyle looks Egyptian.” The books do not give their names. About the hair, though, there is a note: a cluster of curly locks falling to one side, which is usual in the sculptures of Ajanta.

Yakshas are everywhere at Ajanta. On the façade of Cave 19, on either side of the great window. In the verandah of Cave 17, in green, with his name: Manibhadra. And with them, the Nagas: the Naga king seated on his coils at the foot of Cave 16, for whom, the inscription says, the donor had a separate “dwelling” cut.

All these are gods older than the Buddha. Gods of the villages, of trees, of water, of wealth, of children. Buddhism did not drive them out. It gave them a place at the door, seated them in the verandah, and for one of them even arranged a daily meal. At Ajanta the Buddha is in the sanctum. But the way to him passes under the guard of Yakshas and Nagas.



PART

17

The Unknown Artists of Ajanta



*The names of the donors are cut in stone.
Of those who painted, not a single name.*

Standing before Padmapani, I had asked Mohammadi: who painted this?

“Nobody knows that. Nobody can say,” he said. “They wrote only the names of kings. That is how we can tell the date. Ellora or Ajanta, the artists are unknown to this day. It was not the custom here to write the artists’ names.”

There are names at Ajanta. Plenty of them. On the façade of Cave 10, Vasithiputa Katahadi. In Cave 12, a merchant named Ghanamadada. In Cave 16, Varahadeva, minister of Harishena, who describes his cave with pride in his inscription: windows, doors, picture galleries, statues of Apsaras, ornamented pillars, a water cistern. In Cave 17, a feudatory of Harishena. In Cave 26, the monk

Buddhabhadra. In Cave 4, Mathura, son of Abhayanandi. In Cave 20, Upendra. In Cave 2, a record that someone had the “Thousand Buddhas” painted.

All these names belong to those who paid. Ministers, feudatories, monks, merchants. Mohammadi said “the names of kings”; in fact a king’s name appears only to identify the donor: this king’s minister, that king’s feudatory. The merit was the donor’s, and so the name, too, was the donor’s.

What do the walls tell us of those who held the chisel and the brush?

The first thing: there were many of them. Not all the painting is of one quality. On some walls the hand is so assured that the books call it “masterly”. In some places it falters. In a single cave, two walls show two different temperaments. The rows of Buddhas painted in the later period are stiff and lifeless; there the art can be seen going into decline.

The second thing: they worked together. Those who broke the rock, those who shaped the pillars, those who plastered and those who painted were in the same cave at the same time. There are traces of colour even in the unfinished caves; that is how we know.

The third thing: behind them stood someone who could read. In Cave 2, beside the painting of a Jataka, Sanskrit verses from that story are written in paint. In one cave the names of the seven Buddhas and of their trees are written. The painter knew the story, or a monk who knew it stood beside him.

And the fourth thing: they got up and left with the work half done. On one wall of Cave 26 there is a figure with only its outline drawn. Someone drew that line, and did not come back the next day.

In Cave 4, two of the six Buddhas are only half carved. These unfinished places are where one comes closest to the artists of Ajanta. Their hand can still be seen there.

“They were all Indian artists,” Mohammadi had said, “because later the same kind of work was done in other countries.” The books give the other side of this: the influence of the Ajanta style reached as far as Central Asia. That does not settle where the painters came from. But it does tell us that their work did not stop here.

Varahadeva’s name has lasted fifteen hundred years. The name of the man who painted Padmapani’s eyelids has not. Yet it is not for Varahadeva that people come to Ajanta.



PART

18

Myth, Legend and History



*The first 3-D painting, the Persian king,
visitors from another planet: the stories told
about Ajanta, and how they stand up to the test.*

Stories gather around a place like Ajanta. Some are painted on the walls. Some the guides tell. Some circulate on the internet. They cannot all be weighed in the same scale.

Stories of the first kind are religious tales. A white elephant came in Mayadevi's dream. Indra took the newborn child in his hands. At Shravasti the Buddha rose into the sky and one body became a thousand. Mohammadi told these stories just as they are, and on the wall they are painted just as they are. Such stories are not to be tested as history. They tell us what the people of that age believed. I have written them down as "according to tradition".

Stories of the second kind are the guide's. The first 3-D painting. A thousand years before the Mona Lisa. The Persian king. Five hundred and fifty-three Jatakas. The royal astrologer from Bengal. The emblem of the tourism department. When I checked these stories, one thing became clear: almost every one of them is woven around something true. The painting does look different when you change your place. There are foreigners on the wall. The Jatakas do number in the hundreds. There is an elephant on the ceiling. The guide gives that true thing a name that sticks in the memory. "3-D before the Mona Lisa" is remembered more readily than "skill in light and shade fifteen hundred years ago". I have not thrown such stories out. I have set down whose they are.

Stories of the third kind are different. To carve such a hill without machines is impossible. This is not the work of human beings. A lost technology. Craftsmen who came from another planet. Ajanta itself answers such stories, and the answer is in the unfinished caves.

There the work can be seen halted at every stage. In one place only the verandah has been dug out. In another the ceiling is finished, the floor half done. In another the blocks for the pillars have been left standing but not shaped. Blows of the pickaxe, marks of the chisel. No imagination is needed to discover how this work was done; it is written on the stone. And there are mistakes in it. In Cave 11 the pillars are ungainly and the cells crooked; at the start of the second phase the craftsmen were feeling their way, the books say. One cave was carried away by a landslide. The façades of many fell. The donors carved their names with pride in their inscriptions. Groping, erring, learning,

counting out money, and walking away with the work half done: all these are the marks of human beings.

Now and then legend and evidence meet, and that moment is precious. Xuanzang, the Chinese pilgrim of the seventh century, writes that this vihara was built by a man from western India named “A-che-lo”. It sounds like hearsay. But an inscription in Cave 26 records that a monk, the Sthavira Achala, made a “shailagriha”, a dwelling in the rock, for the Buddha. The name the pilgrim had heard was found on the stone.

Ajanta taught me a simple rule. A story does not become true because one likes it. Nor does it become worthless because it has not proved true. It is enough to write down who told it, and on what grounds.



PART

19

The Anxieties of Conservation



*Water, insects, shellac and ourselves: the real enemies
of paintings that have lasted fifteen hundred years.*

In Cave 2 Mohammadi's first sentence was about the elephant. "The elephant here is damaged." In the course of that day I heard him say the word "damaged" again and again. The flaked-off face of a king. The broken hand of the Buddha. The faded story of Sibi. To see Ajanta is to see what remains, and to guess at what has gone.

He gave the reasons himself. "These caves were shut for a very long time. Nature spoiled the paintings. Water seepage is the main problem. The second problem is insects." Before the wall of the Thousand Buddhas: "Water seepage, cracks, damp. That's why this got damaged. But look at that part. That one is in good condition." At the image in the sanctum: "This hand broke off because of water."

The studies on conservation give this same list, and lengthen it a little. Swings of temperature and humidity. The percolation of water. Insects that make their home in the mud plaster. The bats that once lived in the caves. The crowds of tourists. And the people who cut their names into the walls.

But the greatest damage was done by the very people who came to save the paintings, and that is the sting in this tale. In the nineteenth century those who copied the paintings varnished the walls so that the colours would stand out. They worked by the light of oil lamps, and the soot of those lamps settled on the varnish. In 1920 Italian conservators were called in. Without removing the old varnish, they laid a thick coat of shellac over it. In this air the shellac turned a reddish brown. The painting stayed as it was underneath, but a grimy pane of glass had settled over it.

So what Mohammadi said is right. “A painting that has turned black is not ruined. It can be cleaned.” The Archaeological Survey has been removing these layers for several decades now. The work is slow, because the colour is bound with glue and comes away at the touch of water. As the layers are removed, a last thin film is deliberately left in place, for safety. Through this work the oldest paintings, in Caves 9 and 10, have become visible again over the last twenty-five years.

“They use chemicals. Ammonia, methyl alcohol,” Mohammadi had said. I have not been able to confirm independently which chemicals are used, and so this stands here only as his account. He also told me that the lost areas are filled in and the original painting is left untouched.

Beyond the paintings there is the rock itself to worry about. Cave 8 has been largely carried away by a landslide. The façades of many caves have fallen. The cliff stands, but no one can say that it will stand for ever.

And ourselves. The crowds of tourists are on the list of causes of damage. On the two-thousand-year-old paintings in Cave 10, people of later times have scratched their names. That day I, too, was one of that crowd. My breath, my footsteps, the torch switched on for my sake: those walls bore all of it.



The path to the caves, and visitors.

Ajanta was forgotten, and that is why it survived. For centuries hardly anyone came by; no one laid a hand on it. Now the whole world comes. From now on it will have to survive while being remembered, and that is harder.



PART

20

The Ajanta that Mohammadi Showed Me



*Without the man who told the stories,
I would have seen walls. Not Ajanta.*

In these pages I have checked the words of Abdul Nasir Mohammadi against the books. Where they differed, I have said so. This part is not about that reckoning. It is about a debt.

What did he give me?

He gave me places. “Stand here.” “Now move to the corner.” “Look from the other side.” No book tells you where to stand before a painting. Only a man who has stood before that wall again and again can tell you that.

He gave me sequence. The scenes on the wall are not in order. Where to begin, where to take the beam, where to stop: he knew it all

by heart. “It starts here.” “Now look up.” “The last picture is in that corner; you can only see it from a distance.”

He gave me details. The puffed cheeks of the man blowing the conch. The whispering maids. The servant looking on in wonder. The boy dancing, as far from the teacher as he can get. Would I have seen these on my own? I am not sure.

He gave me recognition. The Punjabi suit, the Bermudas, the air hostess’s bun, the children on the back bench. One smiles at these comparisons, but they do a great deal of work. They close a gap of fifteen hundred years in a single sentence. “Nothing has changed, even now”: that sentence of his seems to me the essence of that day.

And he gave me care. He made a point of showing me a painting in good condition. “Look at this part. Still fresh.” He would stop at a damaged painting too, and tell me what had been lost. It was plain from the way he spoke that he feels those walls are his own.

Much of what he told me I found in the books just as he had said it. The colours are mineral. The technique is tempera. The scenes are not in sequence. The artists are unknown. The record of the Thousand Buddhas is there on the wall. There is a flow of lava in the rock. A darkened painting can be cleaned. And for the naughty children in the classroom even the government booklet has his very word.

Where a difference emerged, it was most often a name or a number that differed. The heart of the story was the same. The guide’s work is to keep the story alive. The scholar’s work is to test it. Neither can do without the other. I could have had the books sitting at home. But the books would not have stood me in three places before Padmapani.

One thought has been with me since that day. The paintings of Ajanta were never meant to be seen alone. They were meant to be told by someone. Fifteen hundred years ago some monk must have stood before this very wall with a lamp and said to those in front of him: look at this king, look at this queen, now look up. At some point that lamp went out. Centuries later, a man switched on a torch before the same wall.

In that beam I saw Ajanta.



PART

21

Ajanta, As I Understood It



The visit was complete. The questions remained.

A visit put off for years took place in a single day. That September day ended, the car took the road to Sambhajinagar again, and outside the window the same green began to slide past in the opposite direction.

Going, I had carried longing. Coming back, I carried questions.

What was the name of the man who painted Padmapani's eyelids? By what light did he draw that line before that dark wall? Whose, in the end, is the sinking ship in Cave 1? What is that fruit on the ceiling? Why did the craftsmen in Cave 4 put down their tools one day and go, and why did they not come back?

Scholars are at work on some of these questions. For some, the answers will never be found. And I think that understanding Ajanta does not mean finding answers.



Ajanta, September 2026.

What I understood is only this.

Every story on those walls is a story of giving. One king gives his kingdom. One king gives his own flesh. An elephant gives his tusks. And the caves in which those stories are painted are themselves gifts: of some minister, some monk, some merchant. Those who gave the greatest gift did not even leave their names behind. They gave their eyes and their hands, and they went away.

Second, that work is not the work of one lifetime. No one there could be sure that what he began would be finished in his own lifetime. Still they began, from the ceiling. Looking today at the half-carved pillars, one does not see failure. One sees only that someone was at work until the last day.

Third, seeing. Mohammadi stood me in three places before Padmapani, and from each place the painting looked different. Later I understood that this is true not only of the painting. From where the guide stands, one Ajanta is seen. From where the scholar stands, another. From where I stand, a third. To stand in one place and say “I have seen” is not enough.

And those lowered eyelids. I have read in many books what compassion is. In that painting it is there without words. Beside it stands power, wearing a crown. Beyond is a mother who ate children, whom no one killed; they changed her. Even today there is not much to add to what those people of fifteen hundred years ago knew about human beings.

We write our names on everything, take a photograph of every moment. They painted a mountain from within and did not sign it. Now those walls are in our hands. It is our turn to give them something, and that gift is restraint: less touch, less light, less noise.

That visit is not over for me. What I saw, I have written here. What I heard, I have written too. And what I checked. Still something remains that does not fit into any of the three.

*I saw Ajanta; but what Ajanta showed
me is a question that stays with me still.*

— Vijay Gaikwad

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“I saw Ajanta; but what Ajanta showed me is a question that stays with me still.”



A visit put off for years. The green of September. A guide met at the gate of the caves, the torch in his hand, and walls fifteen hundred years old lighting up one by one in its beam.

What I saw, what the guide told me, and what I checked against the books when I came home: this is the story of all three.

Padmapani’s lowered eyelids, a blue that came from Afghanistan, a mother who ate children, pillars left half carved, and painters who left no name behind.

Vijay Gaikwad

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