

## Music Iconography portrayed in South Asian Buddhist Arts (Based on Veena engravings in Pitalkhora Buddhist cave)



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### Abstract

*This study addresses the research question: Does the seven-stringed Veena depicted in the Pitalkhora Buddhist caves resemble harps from ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, and Greece-Rome, or is it influenced by Hindu practices? To explore this question, a comprehensive literature review and archaeological examination were conducted. The literature survey included library research, map studies, and texts such as the Tripitaka and Jataka, alongside scholarly articles. The archaeological examination aimed to identify structural evidence regarding the characteristics of the Veena engraved in the Pitalkhora caves. Findings indicate that the Veena represented in the stone carvings closely resemble harps from Egypt, Persia, and Mesopotamia, as well as Greco-Roman forms. In contrast, there are no significant similarities between this Veena, and those depicted in Hindu religious customs and practices. Thus, it is evident that the Veena in the Pitalkhora caves is distinctly influenced by these ancient cultures, reflecting Buddhist customs and practices while diverging from the characteristics of the Hindu Veena.*

**Key Words:** Music iconography, South Asian Buddhist Arts, Pitalkhora cave, Veena engravings, Harps

### Research Paper

#### Introduction

The Buddhist caves of Pitalkora carved in the Satmala range on the northern fringe of Aurangabad District of Maharashtra lie 50 miles to the southwest of the Ajanta caves and 23 miles to the northwest of Ellora. These rock-cut caves date back from the 2nd Century BCE to 1st Century CE.<sup>1</sup> Veena together with their plectrums have been found among some sculptures in Cave No. 4. The sculptures are three in number: whereas two sculptures contain the representations of males (Fig. 1 & 2) the other one represents a female along with a male partner (Fig. 03). The figure shown in Fig. 01 is holding a Veena against his left shoulder whereas the male shown in Fig. 02 holds his Veena in between right and left hands while plucking the strings with his left hand. Particularly, in this figure the male figure shows holding the plectrum with his left hand is significant. He is also ornamented with bracelets in his left hand and a double-robbed garland around the neck. The female figure

represented in the sculpture shown in Fig. 03 is playing a Veena with her right hand. The Veena is placed on her lap, and she holds the plectrum (Kona) with her thumb and forefinger of the same hand. The Veena represented in Pitalkora stone engravings, contains three Veena with seven strings like a bow or harp which is different from the Veena depicted at other locations and closely resembles the shape of a harp found in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, Greece, and Rome. Also, the Veena in Pitalkora does not appear to have been influenced by the Veena in Hindu practices. This confirms that the Veena of Pitalkora has its concept conjoined with Buddhism and the shape of the harp seems to have been influenced by Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, Greece, and Rome, and it provides a preamble for the present study.

#### Statement of problem

"Does the Veena displayed in the Pitalkhora Buddhist caves resemble the shape of harps found in ancient

Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, and Greco-Roman cultures, or has it been influenced by Hindu practices?"

### Objectives of the study

The present study aims to examine:

- The characteristics of Pitalkora Veena with those depicted at other locations to explore the historical and cultural interactions.
- To conduct an iconographic analysis of Veena in the Pitalkhora caves, focusing on its artistic depiction and symbolic significance within the context of Buddhist practices.
- To compare the design and characteristics of Veena depicted in the Pitalkhora caves with harps from ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, and Greco-Roman cultures.

### Hypothesis

The design of Veena in the Pitalkhora Buddhist caves is significantly influenced by the harp traditions of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, and Greece-Rome.

Veena depicted in the Pitalkhora caves exhibits distinct characteristics that differentiate it from the Veena represented in Hindu religious practices, indicating a unique Buddhist interpretation.

### Relevance of the Study

The earliest account of the Pitalkhora caves was discovery by John Wilson in 1853 (Archaeological Survey of West India). He described the caves as chaitya halls or viharas. Following this, (Fergusson and Burgess) provided a more detailed examination of the Pitalkhora engravings in their monumental work, *Cave Temples of India*, although they did not specifically address the Veena. Burgess later focused on the Pitalkhora caves in his *Report of the Buddhist Cave-Temples and Their Inscriptions* (Fergusson and Burges), which brought attention to the site's significance. The first mention of the Veena about Pitalkhora appeared in M.G. Dikshit's publication in the *Bombay Historical Society*. Dikshit discovered three engravings of the Veena on stone slabs excavated from the forecourt of Cave No. 4, suggesting that rock-cut architecture at Pitalkhora may date back to the 2nd century BCE. (Dixit)

Swami Prajnanananda continued to explore the Pitalkhora veena in his works, *A History of Indian Music* (Prajnanananda 107-116) and *A Historical Study of Indian Music* (Prajnanananda 374). However, he did not delve deeply into the shape of the Veena or its

resemblance to other cultural depictions. His analyses laid a foundation for understanding the Veena within the broader context of Indian music but fell short of connecting it explicitly to Buddhist iconography. Various representations of Veena across ancient Indian art provide insights into its evolving forms. For instance, sculptures from Bharat (2nd century BCE), terracotta pieces from Ruper Sunga (200 BCE), and artworks from Ajanta (2nd century CE) depict Veenas resembling bow or harp shapes. Notably, coins from the reign of Emperor Samudragupta II (4th century CE) and carvings from Cambodia (6th century CE) also illustrate similar designs. However, the Gandhara style from the 1st to 2nd century CE presents a perpendicular shape that resembles the modern Indian Sarod. The later representations, such as those from Mahabalipuram (7th century CE) and Bengal (9th-14th centuries CE), feature gourd-shaped Veena, known as Saraswati Veena in Hindu practices, which differ significantly from the Pitalkhora Veena. The Rig Veda references a Veena named "Vaana" with a hundred strings. At the same time, various authors such as Narada (1st century CE), Bharata (2nd century CE), and Sarangadeva (13th century CE) describe different types of Veenas in their treatises. However, these descriptions do not indicate any resemblance to the harp-shaped seven-stringed Veena from Pitalkhora. Bharata's *Natyasastra* mentions the Saptatantri veena but does not provide details about its shape. The ancient Egyptian Veena (4000 BCE), known as the "Buni," was bow-shaped and played with a plectrum. A notable example includes a seven-stringed harp found in the tomb of Kaem-Nofer. Similarly, the Persian harp, dating back to 2500 BCE and known as "Chang," shares a bow shape. In contrast, the Greco-Roman lyre resembles a small harp but has distinct differences, being played with a plectrum.

### Research Methodology

This approach combines qualitative and comparative analysis methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Veena representation and cultural significance. The study employed a survey of literature and an examination of archaeological information. The literature survey included library surveys, map studies, Tripitaka, Jathaka, and scholarly studies. The archaeological examination was performed to seek any structural evidence to identify and analyze if the shape of Veena engraved in Pitalkora has been influenced by ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Persian Harps.



## Results and Discussion

The Veena is prominently featured in various ancient sculptures, including those from Bharat (2nd century BCE) (Fig.04), terracotta pieces from Ruper Sunga (200 BCE), and sites in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka (2nd–3rd century CE) (Fig.05). Additionally, it appears on the coins of Emperor Samudragupta II (4th century CE), as well as in artifacts from Cambodia (6th century CE) and Barabudur (8th century CE). Most of these representations show the Veena in a bow or harp shape.

In contrast, different styles of the Veena can be observed in Gandhara, Ajanta, Amaravati, and Nagarjunakonda, where the instruments take on a perpendicular shape with a belly, resembling the modern Indian Sarod. Other variants, characterized by a perpendicular form with gourds, are found in sculptures from Mahabalipuram (7th century CE), Bengal (Ranpur, 9th century CE), and Bengali Kalesvara (14th century CE). The Veena is often associated with Saraswati in Hindu practices, reflecting its significance in later South Indian traditions. However, Veena depicted in the Pitalkhora caves exhibits distinct characteristics that set it apart from Hindu representations.

The evolution of the Hindu Veena shows no connection to the bow or harp-shaped Veena found in the Pitalkhora caves. The Rigveda mentions a Veena called *vaana* (derived from bow), described as having a hundred strings: “*marutah vanam sata-sankhyabhis-tantribhir-yuktam veena-visesam dhamanto vadayantri vadayanti.*” Various authors, including Narada (Naradi Siksha, 1st century CE), Bharata (Natyasastra, 2nd century CE), Matanga (5th–7th centuries CE), Parasavadeva (9th–11th centuries CE), and Sarangadeva (13th century CE), have documented different types of Veenas in their writings. However, none of these descriptions closely resemble the harp-shaped Veena. (Sayan)

Bharata’s *Natyasastra* mentions a seven-stringed *veena* (*Saptatantri Veena*) used in performances, but he does not specify its shape. Narada also references two types of *veenas*, *Daravi* and *Gatra*, without detailed descriptions of their characteristics. Tamil literature from the Sangam period (around 200 BCE) refers to various stringed instruments, such as the *Seerkazhi* and *Yaaz*. The *Yaaz*, an open-stringed Veena with a wooden, boat-shaped resonator, is not related to the Pitalkhora *veena*.

Additionally, the seven-stringed *veena* engraved in Pitalkhora is accompanied by fragmentary sculptures

of a winged Kinnara and a flying Gandharva, which were often regarded as adversaries of the gods during the Vedic period. This suggests that the sculptures in the Pitalkhora caves were not influenced by Vedic concepts.

Swami Prajnanananda, in "A Historical Study of Indian Music," notes that the bow-shaped Veena is also found in sites associated with Buddhism, such as Bharut in India, Burma, and the Brazen Palace (Lavamahapaya) in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. The Veena features in several Jataka tales, compiled between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, with specific references in stories like Guttilla, Matsya, and Bherivada. The Jataka tale of Guttilla mentions a seven-stringed Veena, while the Tripitaka contains references in the Sona Sutta and Sakka Panha Sutta (Ghose).

In ancient Mesopotamia, two types of harps (older than 3500 BCE) called ‘Sabbeka’ and ‘Psantrina Sunifouyah’ was played with a plectrum. Artifacts like the Standard of Ur depict harp players and highlight the instrument's historical significance. Similarly, the bow-shaped Veena of ancient Egypt (circa 4000 BCE) was known as the "Buni," also played with a plectrum. In Persia (circa 2500 BCE), the harp, known as ‘Chang,’ displayed similar bow-shaped characteristics. (Reese)

Although the Greek lyre shares a superficial resemblance with the bow-shaped harp, it is distinct in its structure. Overall, the evidence suggests that the Veena depicted in the Pitalkhora caves may have been influenced by ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Persian and Greece-Rome harp designs, rather than by Hindu traditions.

## Conclusions

The evidence presented indicates that Veena depicted in the Pitalkhora stone engravings resembles the bow and harp shapes found in ancient Egyptian and Persian harps, as well as showing influences from Mesopotamian and Greco-Roman designs. In contrast, there is no corresponding representation of the *veena* in Hindu religious customs, nor do those depictions exhibit the characteristics seen in the Pitalkhora engravings. This distinction suggests that Veena in Pitalkhora caves embodies unique traits reflective of Buddhist customs and practices, potentially influenced by the aforementioned cultures due to long-established interactions with India. Ultimately, these findings highlight the significance of Pitalkhora Veena as a testament to the rich tapestry of cross-cultural influences in ancient Indian art and music.



Fig.01

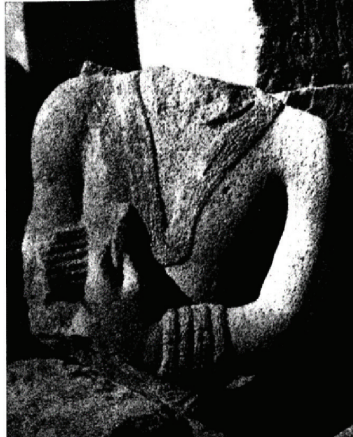


Fig.02



Fig.03



Fig.04



Fig.05

### Glossary of Terms

1. **Tripitaka:** The sacred texts of Buddhism, consisting of the Dharma (teachings of the Buddha), along with commentary and rules for monks and nuns. The term "Tripitaka" is derived from Pali, meaning "Triple Basket" (Tri = Three + Pitaka = Baskets).
2. **Jataka:** A voluminous body of literature that primarily concerns the previous births of Gautama Buddha.
3. **Veena:** A plucked string instrument often played during religious ceremonies and rituals. It is also used in traditional Hindu music and dance performances.
4. **Harp:** A stringed musical instrument characterized by individual strings that run at an angle to its soundboard; the strings are plucked with the fingers.
5. **Saptatantri:** A harp-shaped string instrument with seven strings (Sapta = Seven + Tantri = Strings).

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