

Portrayal of music and dance in Ajanta murals



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Abstract

Music and dance are integral parts of the culture of a society. The following paper will look into the depiction of musical instruments and dancing posture primarily of the Mahajanaka Jataka of Cave 1 of Ajanta. Still, references to other murals with musical instruments have also been made. This paper explores the Ajanta murals of both the Satavahana and the Vakataka periods to better understand the dance and music prevalent during that time. What type of dance did the people perform during the Vakataka period? The paper looks at the various musical instruments that are depicted in the paintings. The focus of the dance is the S-shaped posture or the tribhanga posture. What type of music were the people interested in? what musical instruments were available to use during that time? This paper would answer questions pertaining to these questions.

Keywords: Paintings, musical instruments, dance, Ajanta, murals

Research Paper

Introduction

The terms painting, music, and dancing play significant roles in fine arts. A person with a fundamental understanding of the aesthetic arts was considered knowledgeable. The murals at Ajanta are a mirror of contemporary life and culture. The Buddhist subject matter was depicted by the artists while keeping in mind the society that was prevalent throughout the times of Satavahana and Vakataka. There is a wide variety of subject matter depicted in Ajanta, ranging from flora and fauna to kings, queens, gods and demons. The entrances and ceilings feature and recur with the most prevalent fortunate motifs. They include romantic couples, mythical creatures, geese, creepers, lotus creepers, conches, and garlands of flowers. We also see motifs from everyday life in these paintings. The most significant attribute of Ajanta paintings is that they are filled with emotion and can be referred to as *bhavachitras*. The sculptures and paintings at Ajanta provide an exciting view into Buddhist mythology and India's contemporary economic, social, and religious life through the subjects they depict. The depicted material culture in the paintings is instrumental in constructing a picture of life in ancient India. From architecture to personal ornaments to arms and armor, these paintings help us understand the culture and society of the period. The depiction of musical instruments and the dancing girls in the paintings give us an understanding of the cultural life of the people.

Mahajanaka Jataka is distinct in the sense that the entire entourage of orchestra and dancer in this scene are women, which is rare in Indian art.

History of Ajanta

Ajanta Caves are located in Maharashtra and are known for their exquisite murals and sculptures. They are a group of approximately thirty rock-cut monuments dating from the 2nd century BCE to the sixth century CE; they were excavated in two different periods. Most of these caves are Viharas or residential quarters, and only a few are Chaityas or prayer halls. The caves were named after a nearby village, Ajintha. According to Buddhist texts, Buddha had instructed the monk not to live too near the city. Ajanta made a perfect spot not just because of its location but also because of the waterfall and trade route it fell on. Because of its proximity, the monks could still go to the town to ask for alms. However, the caves were intended as a place for shelter during monsoons. The first literary evidence of the caves is found in the works of Hiuen T'sang in the 7th century CE. He was on a Chinese pilgrimage to India, and though he never visited Ajanta, he still mentioned it in his work.^[1] The stories of Buddha's life and Jataka tales form the subject matter for these paintings. These caves shed light on the popularity of Buddhism while giving information about the present society.

The Buddhist cave temples first appeared in Ancient

India, where it was used for liturgical and daily purposes. The caves were excavated in two phases with a time gap of four hundred years – first during the Satavahana period (mid 1st century BCE – Early 3rd Century CE)^[2] and then during the Vakataka Period (mid 3rd Century CE – late 5th/early 6th Century CE).^[3] The first phase was during the Satavahana period, and the Satavahana paintings are the earliest examples outside of prehistoric India. They can only be discovered at Ajanta. The finest example of Satavahana painting can be seen in Ajanta Cave no. 10. Only about three and a half centuries after Buddha's death, Buddhist art in India began earnestly. The caves were of Hinayana sects during the Satavahana period, and only two caves, i.e., Cave 9 and 10 of these periods have murals. The caves of the Vakataka period are of interest to us. They belong to the Mahayana sect of Buddhism and are adorned with murals and images of Buddha. However, the dates of these caves are highly debated. Although there is no record of any direct involvement of the Vakatakas in Ajanta, most of the caves were excavated during the reign of Harisena. Two reasons illuminate the cause; first, he has been extolled in Ajanta inscriptions despite being a Hindu ruler. Second, Buddhist rock-cut architecture was restored to its former glory during his reign after years of silence.^[4] The second phase of the caves was done by the Vakataka rulers, who were contemporaries of the Guptas in North India. The most famous caves of this period are Caves 1, 2, 16, and 17, also the most extensively painted caves. The Gupta–Vakataka period is known as the Golden Age of India because of the progress made in art and culture. Ajanta cave is one such example.

Ajanta became prominent after their rediscovery when in 1819, a British hunting expedition chanced upon the Ajanta Caves. A captain of the Madras regiment rediscovered it, and soon artists and art historians like William Erskine, James E. Alexander, James Fergusson, Robert Gill, John Griffith, Lady Herringham, Madanjeet Singh crowded the place to paint replicas of the paintings and undertake studies about them. James Fergusson was the first to present a scholarly report on the caves in 1843. His report was followed by the British government sponsoring three significant attempts to make reproductions of these paintings by Major Robert Gill, John Griffith, and Lady Herringham. By chance, the replicas of these paintings were destroyed in separate incidents, and what remains are the black and white photographs of these paintings by James Burgess. Under the then Nizam of Hyderabad, G. Yazadani undertook extensive research

on the caves, which was then published in four volumes and used photographs of Mr. E.L. Vassey. Following him, photographers like David L. De Harport and Dr. A. Ghosh also photographed these murals to preserve their memory. The latest people photographing these caves are Madanjeet Singh, Benoy K. Behl, etc. The caves are numbered not chronologically but serially from the entrance at the east side.

Dance in Ajanta Murals

Dance and painting go hand in hand. In *Citrasutra* of *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, Chapter two states, "It is very difficult to know the canon of painting without knowing the canons of dance, because O King! In both, the world is to be imitated (or represented)".^[5] One of the most prominent pictures of girls dancing is depicted in Cave 1. It is the dancing girl with musicians of the *Mahajanaka Jataka*, which is very clearly displayed on the interior left wall of the Cave. *Mahajanaka Jataka* is a story of King Mahajanaka of Mithila who had two sons: Aritthajanaka and Polajanaka. As Mahajanaka passed away, Aritthajanaka succeeded to the throne and offered his younger brother the viceroyalty. One day an enslaved person informed the monarch that the viceroy was plotting to assassinate him and take over the throne. As Aritthajanaka developed suspicions, Polajanaka was detained and imprisoned. Yet, the gods permitted Polajanaka to flee because he was a good man. The younger brother eventually amassed a strong force after taking control of the frontier regions and requested the King to give up his throne or face him in a battle. Aritthajanaka was murdered in the ensuing conflict, and his pregnant queen snuck out of the palace while pretending to be someone else. She sought safety in Champa, where she gave birth to a baby who was given the name Mahajanaka in honor of his paternal grandfather. The prince turned out to be a young and intelligent man and, on finding the truth about his father, told his mother that he would win over his kingdom by starting a small business and making money. Mahajanaka later sailed for Suvannabhumi with a small group of other merchants. Unfortunately, the ship sank, but Manimekhala, God's daughter, miraculously saved Mahajanaka and brought him to Mithila. In the meantime, King Polajanaka passed away without leaving a male heir. He had stipulated in his testament that his kingdom should go to whoever can please Princess Sivali or to someone who knows which is the head of a square bed, or who can string the bow which requires the strength of a thousand men, or who can draw out the sixteen great treasures.

Mahajanaka triumphed where others had failed, rising to the position of King of Mithila and marrying the lovely Sivali. But the grandeur and extravagance of royal life did not appeal to the Bodhisattva, who eventually gave up his throne and became an ascetic. He objected to having dancing performances in his court and did not find it amusing that animals were free to roam through his park. Even the ladies in his court could not persuade him to change his decision. He was also unmoved by the simultaneous blows of a palace fire and woodland barbarians capturing his country.



*Mahajanaka Jataka (Cave 1)**

The *Mahajanaka Jataka* follows a narrative sequence where different images are depicted to show the whole story. Hundreds of figurines are painted in the story sequences, yet every single one is unique. The various sections of the painting are separated by the use of building elements and landscape. When the murals were painted, there must have been a highly developed and affluent society for the paintings to be there. This is evidenced by the pavilion's lavish decoration, which includes bejeweled pillars. When depicting a scene, painters sometimes leave out crucial architectural features to make the image clear and uncluttered. For example, the column of the structure under which the scene depicting the dancing girl is shown has been marked, but it has not been painted so that the viewer can continue to see the dance sequence unobstructed.

The distinction in location and time from one incident to the next is emphasized by cleverly separating scenes and placing them in suitable settings. Each scene is characterized by ideal groups of characters, with the main protagonist typically receiving the emphasis and being positioned in the Centre. On the extreme left is the renunciation scene, followed by the scene of the dancing girls. There are seven musicians in the scene. All of the women in the narrative, from the gorgeous ladies of the

palace to their attendants, singers, dancers, devotees, everyday women, and even beggars, are portrayed as having fantastic intelligence and bright vitality. While the artist was attempting to capture the curves of her body and the tilt of her head, the motions of her hand, or the slanting glances of her eyes, he appears to have been overcome with a sense of new experience and exhilaration. The attire, posture, and ornaments of the girls are worth mentioning.



*Dancing Girls with the Musicians (Cave 1)**

Clothes are sometimes referred to as the yardstick of society's shifting fashion trends, with good reason. The clothes discovered in Ajanta murals are in a relatively advanced stage of development. The murals have the freedom to show the colorful dresses adorned by society at that time. The lower garment is known as *ardha-janghikā*. The men and the women wore an *ardhoruka*, a long piece of cloth tied around the waist and usually stripped in the case of women, and generally, tufts are left hanging loose. Apart from short tufts, the women prefer to wear long dhotis, which are tightly fitted on the thighs and legs.^[6] Apart from this, they also wore long and short skirts. We see women wearing top to knee length with vertical stripes, and the central band on the front contains a delicate floral design that was probably embroidered. The women wear a lower garment as an *ikhat*, a dress still worn in the state today. The garment's material is exceptionally transparent, giving an illusion of them not wearing anything unless looked closely. The women from the royal might be wearing a fine muslin or silk to give that illusion. Queen Sivali is depicted wearing a bodice with full sleeves. It has a dotted pattern

and is made of two pieces of red and green material. The musicians, just like the maid, are depicted wearing short dhotis. The drummer is shown wearing a breastband.

The lead dancer has her hair twisted in a spiral and is entwined with pearl strings. The hairstyles of the dancers and the musicians are hair tied in a bun. Typically, hair is divided along the center, brushed back, and tied into a round bun. The bun is frequently draped in a net and decorated with flowers or a floral wreath. The hairstyle, which features flower sprigs entwined with her bun, is attractive, according to the *Citrasutra*. Dancers wear large, beaded ornaments, including an *arsī* (thumb ring with a small mirror), *karanphūl* (earrings with elaborate designs), and *sarāsārī* (head decorations comprising gold or pearl strings).^[7]

It shows us how a dance scene in which the movement of the swinging body stretches in many directions within the imagined frame, pivoting on the hips, shoulders, and eyes as the primary axes. The intensity of the rhythm, depicted in the central figure, is bolstered by the two flute players on her right, who are portrayed in *tribhanga* stances with their arms in the opposite direction. The dancer is seen in the most interesting S-curve.^[8] In keeping with the principles of the *Citrasutra*, dancers' scarves are also seen swirling behind her with her movements. The dancer's posture is the most intriguing one. This movement is characteristic of Indian dance styles that are still practiced today and reveal how well-established these traditions were over 1,500 years ago.^[9]

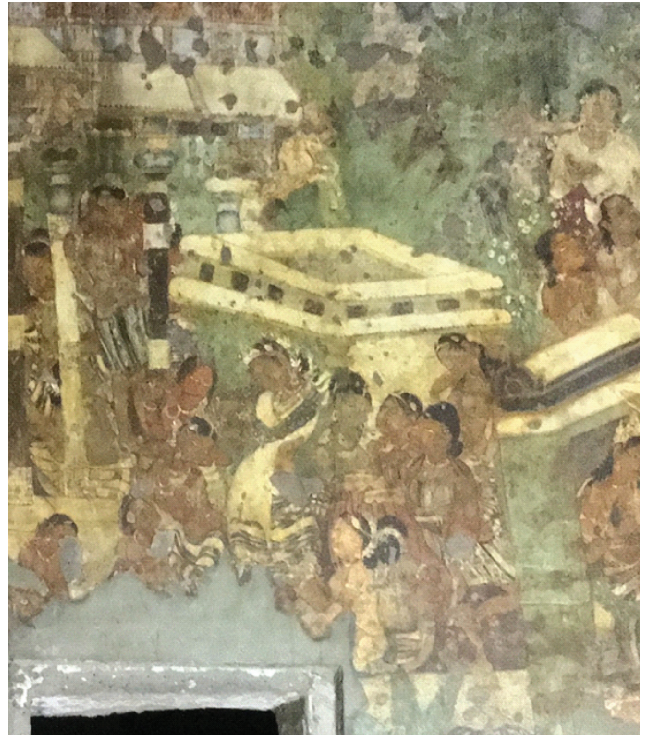


*Bodhisattava Vajrapani (Cave 1)**

Another example of a soaring figure on an S-curve is that of the Bodhisattva Vajrapani, who is depicted in a *tribhanga* posture with three bends. He is depicted wearing a striped lower garment accompanied with jewelry and a bejeweled headdress. To comply with the *tribhanga* stance, the emphasis was placed more on the stride, and the whole body was arranged around three main axes. This was significantly more important than the particulars of the position. This is a well-known concept in Indian classical art, and dancers constantly put it into practice. It imparts an S-shaped rhythm, fluidity and flow of lines upon the body, which can convey a comprehensive spectrum of emotions when combined with the appropriate hand gestures.

Illustrations of Musical Instruments

Music is an integral part of society. Visual art depends on the performing art of dancing, which depends on the music.



*Dancing Girls with the Musicians**

In Chapter 2 of *Citrasutra* of *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, Markandeya replies to Vajra's question about the relation between music and dance: "Dance is difficult to be understood by one, who does not know instrumental music (*Ātodya*). Without instrumental music, there cannot be dancing".^[10] We find evidence of music in Ajanta murals as well. It is the caves of the Vakataka period, which have paintings of musical instruments

made on them. It gives us an idea about music's prevalence and importance in that society. There is only the conch shell, which doubles as a religious emblem, and the flute instead of trumpets. Stringed instruments include the *vina*, or guitar with many strings, and the *ektara*, or one-stringed banjo, while the cylindrical earthenware or painted wood drum, tambourine, and cymbals round out the symphony.^[11] Four groups of musical instruments are found in Ajanta murals. They are string instruments (*Tata*), Percussion instruments (*Ānaddha*), wind instruments (*Suṣira*) solid instruments (*Ghana*).^[12]

Seven musicians are represented in the picture of the *Dancing girls with Musicians*: two flautists, two cymbal players, one who plays a pair of drums (dhol), another who plays a *mridang*, and one who plays a stringed instrument. These musical instruments are still in use in India, essentially unmodified.^[13] The wind instruments represented in the *Mahajanaka Jataka* are Conch and flute. All the flutes in Ajanta murals are hand-held flutes with knobbed or obliquely cut ends. The *Mahajanaka Jataka* contains descriptions of a flute with knobbed ends and a hole located some distance from one end. The modern flute has eight holes, but the ancient one probably had seven. It is made of a straightforward cylindrical tube with a constant bore sealed off at one end. A mouth hole is pierced into the object three-quarters of an inch from the closed end. The earliest collection of paintings features a long, tubular trumpet. The murals from the Satavahana period only have one example of a musical instrument in cave 10. The arrival of Raja from the painting *The Raja with his retinue*, where a group of female musicians are depicted, in cave 10 has trumpets on it. It is a story of a king who has come to pay tribute to the Bodhi tree. The mural has two trumpets while the other ladies are seeing either singing or clapping. It has been pointed out by art historians like Yazdani and M.K Dhavalikar. Still, it has been contested by Griffith, according to whom there is no evidence of the use of trumpets in Ajanta paintings. The trumpet has a narrow beginning and a broad ending simultaneously. It has a cup-shaped connection connected to its mouth to be blown through for music. A similar trumpet but a smaller size can be found in Cave 16, *The Procession*, which is part of the latter group of paintings. The conch is a wind instrument that dates back quite far in history and is likely the ancestor of the trumpet. In ancient India, there were two different ways to blow a conch. It was blown through either a perforation in the spiral top or a little pipe made of metal that was given at the top. The

Ajanta murals depict the blowing of conch formerly, as no metal pipe is visible.

Almost all the painted caves have some or other type of musical instruments. It shows the importance of music in society at that time. The famous Cave 1 painting *'Dancers with Musicians,'* which is a part of *Mahajanaka Jataka*, has drums, conch, and flutes depicted. The drums are widely regarded as India's oldest musical instrument. The traditional Indian drum is called a *mṛdaṅga*, meaning 'clay body'.^[14] The painting shows three different kinds of drums: a drum held in the lap (*aṅkya*), a drum held under the arm (*āliṅgya*), and drums kept on the ground (*ūrdhvaka*). *Aṅkya*, which is a small drum, is held by a female drummer in her lap in this mural. Its shell was most likely fashioned from a solid piece of resonant wood. It is possible that the braces, made of twine or leather, are strung from one end to the other. They are undoubtedly included so that the instrument can be tuned. The *Āliṅgya* is shaped like an hourglass, which facilitates its holding under the arm. It seems the body was excavated from within a solid block of wood. It does not have any braces attached to it. The center of the drum is thickly coated with the paste, but the edges become less dense as they move outward. This dark paste is what gives the drum its very refined tone, and it is what gives the drum its name.^[15] The drums kept on the ground are one of the most visible pairs of drums in the *Mahajanaka Jataka*. One of them is marginally more imposing than the other in height. The exterior could be hollowed-out wood, clay, or metal. The holes in the leather face are used to guide the braces that run vertically, which are most likely made of leather. However, there do not appear to be any barrel-shaped blocks of wood inserted in them to tighten.^[16] In addition to the *Mahajanaka Jataka*, several other murals feature depictions of various musical instruments. It is not just the Jatakas represented on the walls; we also find musical instruments on the ceilings held by dwarfs and apsaras.

Conclusion

Music and dance help in a better understanding of society. All fine arts are interlinked, and Ajanta murals exemplify that. We see evidence of dance in the *Mahajanaka Jataka*. Within the *Mahajanaka* panel, we can make out the meticulous arrangement of the composition in accordance with the closely related tradition of painting, dance, and music. The paintings depict a colorful panorama of life. The depiction of women at Ajanta is where the creative genius of the site

resides. The picture representing dance postures or musical instruments depicts more than simply the cultural aspect of the subject matter. It gives us an understanding of their way of life through the clothes they wore, the headdresses, and the poses. In the past, it was commonly believed that achieving personal brilliance necessitated mastering the art of dance and music. Seeing the people of Deccan during the Vakataka depicts their grandeur. The representations of dance found on the walls of Ajanta provide evidence that dance is an essential component of society. The *tribhanga* posture of the dancer gives us an idea that the dancer was well-versed in the *Natyashastra*. The presence of several types of musical instruments in the paintings of Ajanta provides some insight into the people's interest in the music of the time. It is not just the men who played the instruments but also the women as depicted in *Mahajanaka Jataka*.

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