



CULTURAL HERITAGE OF MAHARASHTRA: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BUDDHIST TOURISM

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Abstract:

Maharashtra is one of India's richest cultural regions, and its Buddhist heritage forms a particularly significant part of this legacy. The state has the highest number of ancient Buddhist rock-cut caves in India, reflecting a vibrant monastic and artistic tradition that flourished from the 3rd century BCE to the 7th century CE. Iconic sites such as Ajanta, Ellora, Karla, Bhaja, Kanheri and Junnar illustrate the development of chaityas, viharas, stupas and murals, and highlight Maharashtra's historical role along major trade routes linking the coast with the Deccan. These cave complexes attract international visitors, especially from East and Southeast Asia, as well as large numbers of domestic tourists and academic groups. Despite their importance, issues like overcrowding, limited connectivity and conservation challenges persist. With improved infrastructure, heritage interpretation and sustainable tourism planning, Maharashtra has the potential to become a leading global centre for Buddhist tourism and cultural appreciation.

Keywords: *Buddhist Heritage, Cultural Tourism.*

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Introduction: Cultural Heritage of Maharashtra

Maharashtra is one of India's most culturally vibrant regions, known for its deep historical layers, architectural diversity and living traditions. The state's cultural identity is shaped by several heritage components, including ancient Buddhist and Hindu cave architecture, Maratha forts, Bhakti movement traditions, tribal arts, urban colonial heritage, and vibrant festivals such as Ganesh Utsav (*Kulke & Rothermund 2004*). Traditional crafts like Paithani weaving, Kolhapuri leatherwork, Bidriware metalwork, and Sawantwadi lacquerware further enrich this cultural landscape (*Chavan 2018*).

Among these varied elements, Buddhist cave heritage stands out uniquely, as it represents the earliest surviving architectural and artistic tradition in Maharashtra. The state has the highest concentration of ancient Buddhist rock-cut caves in India (*ASI 2020*), making it central to the study and promotion of Buddhist tourism.

Buddhist Heritage in Maharashtra:

Buddhism flourished in Maharashtra from the 3rd century BCE to the 7th century CE under dynasties such as the Mauryas, Satavahanas, Western Kshatrapas, and Vakatakas (*Dehejia, 1997, pp. 23–28*). During this period, a sophisticated network of rock-cut



monasteries, chaitya-grihas (prayer halls), stupas, viharas (monastic dwellings), sculptures, murals, and inscriptions developed along major trade routes connecting coastal ports like Sopara, Kalyan, and Chaul with the Deccan hinterland (Thapar, 2002, pp. 142–146). The development of Buddhist iconography and the richly painted murals, most famously at Ajanta, along with donor inscriptions from monks, merchants, and rulers, collectively highlight Maharashtra's role as a major centre of Buddhist learning, art, and monastic life in ancient India (Schopen, 2010, pp. 58–62).

Major Buddhist Sites of Maharashtra (Tourism Perspective):

1. Ajanta Caves (Aurangabad)

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Ajanta is world-renowned for its exquisite murals depicting Jataka tales and scenes from the Buddha's life. The caves represent the pinnacle of Indian classical art during the Gupta–Vakataka period (Cohen 2006). Ajanta attracts a significant number of international tourists, especially from East and Southeast Asia.

2. Ellora Caves

Another UNESCO site, Ellora contains 12 major Buddhist caves showcasing the Mahayana tradition and advanced rock-cut architecture. Large prayer halls, intricate carvings and monumental Buddha figures make it a major destination for both heritage and spiritual tourism (Michell 2015).

3. Karla Caves (Pune District)

Karla houses the largest early Buddhist chaitya hall in India, exemplifying Hinayana architectural excellence. Its historical association with trade guilds also adds to its significance (Dehejia 1997).

4. Bhaja Caves

Located near Lonavala, Bhaja features stupas, viharas and wooden-style ribbed chaitya arches. The site attracts trekkers, students and cultural tourists.

5. Kanheri Caves (Mumbai)

Situated within Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Kanheri consists of more than **100 caves**, once functioning as a major monastic university. Its location within Mumbai makes it an important urban heritage site.

6. Junnar Caves

With over 200 caves, Junnar is one of the largest cave complexes in India. It includes groups such as Tulja, Lenyadri and Manmodi, rich in inscriptions and early sculptures.

7. Pitalkhora Caves

Among Maharashtra's oldest Buddhist cave sites, Pitalkhora is relatively less commercialized and holds tremendous potential for niche heritage tourism.

8. Other Important Sites

Bedse, Ghoradeshwar, and the Pandavleni (Nashik) Caves are also significant for understanding the spread of early Buddhism in western India.

Relevance of Buddhist Heritage to Tourism:

a) International Tourism

Thousands of international tourists from countries such as Japan, Korea, China, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Cambodia visit Maharashtra's Buddhist sites each year, drawn by the state's rich cultural and historical heritage. Their interest is primarily motivated by the UNESCO World Heritage sites of Ajanta and Ellora, which showcase exceptional artistic and architectural achievements, as well as early Buddhist rock-cut architecture found in Karla, Kanheri, and Bhaja. Additionally, the scriptural significance of the Jataka-based murals at these caves adds a spiritual and educational dimension that appeals to visitors seeking a deeper understanding of Buddhist traditions and history (Cohen, 2006, pp. 75–80).



b) Domestic Tourism

Heritage enthusiasts, trekkers, art students and pilgrims regularly visit these cave sites.

c) Academic Tourism

Universities and research centres in archaeology, history, Buddhist studies and conservation organize frequent study tours, demonstrating the academic value of these heritage sites (*Schopen 2010*).

Government Initiatives:

The government of Maharashtra has implemented several initiatives to promote and preserve the state's Buddhist heritage. The **Ajanta–Ellora Tourism Development Project (AETDP)** focuses on improving tourist facilities, infrastructure, and conservation at these UNESCO World Heritage sites. Additionally, a proposal for a **Maharashtra Buddhist Tourism Circuit** aims to connect major cave sites, enhancing accessibility for both domestic and international visitors. The **Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)** continues its restoration and conservation efforts across key Buddhist complexes, while the **Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC)** offers specialized tourism packages to attract heritage and spiritual tourists. Cultural events such as the **Ajanta–Ellora Festival** further promote global visibility and awareness of Maharashtra's rich Buddhist legacy (MTDC, 2022, pp. 4–6).

Challenges:

1. Overcrowding at popular sites like Ajanta and Ellora.
2. Poor road connectivity to lesser-known caves.
3. Damage from weathering, pollution and vandalism.
4. Lack of interpretation centres and multilingual signage.
5. Shortage of trained guides specializing in Buddhist heritage.

Future Potential:

With systematic planning, Maharashtra has the potential to significantly expand its Buddhist tourism

network by developing integrated Buddhist tourism circuits that connect major cave sites across the state. Initiatives such as eco-tourism, trekking routes, and heritage trails can enhance visitor engagement while promoting sustainable travel. The introduction of AR/VR-based digital interpretation at cave sites would enrich educational experiences and make the heritage more accessible to global audiences. Organizing international Buddhist conferences and cultural exchange programs can further strengthen Maharashtra's position as a centre for Buddhist studies and tourism. Additionally, curated heritage walks in cities like Mumbai, Pune, Konkan, and Aurangabad can allow visitors to explore the region's historical layers and cultural depth, promoting sustainable tourism while preserving the integrity of these ancient sites.

Conclusion:

Maharashtra's cultural heritage is rich and diverse, but its Buddhist cave sites hold a unique and globally significant place. From the exquisite murals of Ajanta to the impressive architectural achievements at Ellora, and from the dense monastic complexes of Kanheri to Junnar, the state showcases nearly every stage of ancient Buddhist art and architecture. With careful conservation, effective visitor management, and active global promotion, Maharashtra has the potential to become one of the world's premier destinations for Buddhist tourism, attracting scholars, pilgrims, and heritage enthusiasts from across the globe.

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