



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 8.428 (SJIF 2026)

THE CHAITYA IN HINAYANA ARCHITECTURE: A STUDY OF KARLA'S CHAITYA HALL

Anwesha Kundu

Undergraduate Student,
Department of History,
St. Xavier's College (Autonomous),
Mumbai (Maharashtra, India)

DOI No. 03.2021-11278686 DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doilink/07.2026-17262649/IRJHIS2607005>

Abstract:

The Chaitya Hall is one of the most enduring achievements of Hinayana Buddhist Architecture in India, embodying their core philosophy of simplicity, introspection, and self-reliance. This paper examines Cave 8 of the Karla Caves in Maharashtra - the Great Chaitya Hall - and argues that it is potentially the pinnacle of Hinayana rock architecture in India. The paper traces the evolution from its origins as a sacred grove to the sophisticated rock-hewn caves of the Western Ghats. It examines the defining structural features of chaityas, including their pillars, arches, roof, circumambulatory passages, stupa, and though limited, still spiritually significant symbols, demonstrating how each element combined functionality with deep spirituality. The paper also briefly considers the socio-economic importance of the Karla Complex, as a seat of Buddhist religious and economic power, connecting trade and religion through its patrons and devotees. The paper also notes the Mahayana influences that infiltrate the external façade; however, it maintains that the Karla Caves retain their austere and aniconic character, as the interior of the hall remains free from these influences. The analysis concludes that Cave 8 is the pinnacle of Hinayana rock architecture, not due to a single feature, but through the masterful convergence of technical innovation, symbolic depth, and spiritual purpose, making the Great Chaitya Hall of Karla a culmination of Hinayana tradition in western India.

Keywords: Chaitya, Karla Caves, Hinayana, Buddhist architecture, excavation, Cave 8, rock architecture, stupa, arch, window

Introduction:

In 225 BC, Asoka declared Buddhism the 'state religion of the country' (Brown 7), rejuvenating and advancing Buddhist art and architecture all over India. Of the two main sects, the Hinayana predated the Mahayana, their faith following the practice of morality with few simple ceremonial requirements, focusing more on self-reliance and introspective spirituality.

In Maharashtra, the most memorable Buddhist architectural structures are the rock-hewn shrines and their associated complexes. These have been categorised into 3 classes by R. S. Wauchope

– Stupas, Stambhas and Caves – which are further divided into (a) Chaitya Halls, (b) Viharas and (c) Bikshu-grihas.

Objectives:

- To trace the historical origins of the chaitya till the creation of Cave 8
- To examine the defining structural and symbolic features of the Chaitya Hall as manifested in Cave 8 of the Karla Caves
- To establish Cave 8 as the zenith of Hinayana Buddhist rock-architecture.
- To briefly explore the socio-economic significance of the Karla Caves as a centre of pilgrimage, patronage, and trade.

Hypothesis:

This paper hypothesises that the Great Chaitya of Karla, Cave 8, represents the pinnacle of India's Hinayana Buddhist architecture by successfully integrating innovations in structure, symbolism, and space with the philosophical tenets of Hinayana Buddhism, creating a spiritual, communal, and architectural masterpiece.

Methodology:

The paper applies a descriptive-analytical methodology, relying primarily on secondary sources. The analysis is grounded in a close interpretation of the structural and symbolic features of Cave 8 and their significance. Data is drawn from published surveys, site documentation, and recorded inscriptions, allowing the paper to combine historical, structural, and symbolic evidence into a unified conclusion.

The Chaitya:

Hinayana ascetism was marked by 'inner effort, self-reliance and high spirituality, neither asking for grace or assistance from any celestial sphere nor anticipating the bliss of some paradise' (Zimmer 250), and excavations were made according to these core beliefs. With the patronage of rulers like Asoka and the Shungas, Buddhism began steadily spreading, leading for a necessity for complexes and structures for devotees and the spread of beliefs. In this regard, the necessities of the layfolk led to the creation of the chaityas. Evolving in tandem was the desire of artisans to display their relics, beliefs, and craftsmanship. As these factors converged, it should be no surprise then that the rock-hewn chaityas are considered some of the most impressive monuments of the late Shunga period (Craven 51). Rock-architecture, an especially difficult artform, makes the simple yet refined artisanal beauty of the Karla Caves immensely impressive, considering the early tools and methods utilised.

To understand the concept behind the chaitya, one needs to understand the word. Owen C. Kail suggests the term 'chaitya' is derived from 'chita' or 'funeral pyre', connoting 'any sacred spot, a tree, an image of the Buddha or a temple' (16). Heinrich Zimmer claims the word designates a shrine worshipped through an act of circumambulation, with a stupa as the central object of worship (246).

The different etymologies of this singular word show the evolution of the 'chaitya' concept from a broad definition of 'any sacred spot' to a 'designated shrine' based solely for worship and devotion.

Traditional chaityas, in the earliest usage of the word, were tree groves (Grover 35). But with the developing stupa, there was a growing desire for an enclosed structure allowing worship year-round (Grover 44). Satish Grover stipulates that heavy rains of the Western Ghats would have also made worship difficult and thus rock hewn halls were constructed for this express purpose (50), becoming a key aspect of Buddhist architecture. Percy Brown credits its appeal to its 'immovable' (19) and steady quality, in comparison to susceptible wooden structures, though he attributes the main reason being a general shift towards monasticism from the strict asceticism of the Vedic Ages.

The Karla Caves:

The Karla Caves are a complex of rock-cut Buddhist caves near Lonavala, Maharashtra, a later work of the Andhra dynasty excavated between the late first century and early second century (Craven 56). This complex is considered one of India's finest and most magnificent Hinayana Buddhist excavations. Karla's Chaitya Hall, Cave 8, is the largest, and, comparing it to other caves like Kanheri, has earned itself the status of the 'best preserved' (Incredible India) chaitya.

Cave 8 bears the characteristic markings of innovations and developments in rock architecture. The following section outlines the structural features of chaityas and their manifestation in Cave 8.

Structural features of Cave 8:

A chaitya has particularly distinct structural features, with Kail identifying four key characteristics (24) – The chaitya arch or window, a stupa, an oblong chamber (apsidal or squared at the end of the hall), and the absence of residential cells in the temple.

These structural features are prominently visible in Cave 8 and will be further expanded upon below.

The initial chaitya roofs were flat, before transitioning into vaulted roofs fitted with wooden ribs (Kail 22). Cave 8 also maintains a series of wooden 'teak ribs' of the original excavation (Asher 174). Both Kail and Wauchope have proposed that these wooden ribs eliminate excessive echo formation, as seen in other cave complexes with wooden ribbed roofing like Bhaja (Wauchope 44), enshrining the hall in a still, serene calm, where chants vibrate with a low intensity rather than bouncing off the walls, showing a level of thoughtful design.

Chaitya pillars were generally octagonal columns (Kail 22), replicated from previous wooden structures (Brown 21), creating a 'Pradakshina Patha' or circumambulatory passage, used by devotees to circle the stupa in a clockwise direction for the rite of worship, 'pradakshina' (Asher 173).

The Hinayana sect rarely utilized sculptures representing deities, though they adopted a host of symbols from ancient Vedic and Aryan ideas (Wauchope 12), and in Karla, the pillars are the most symbolically rich. The nave of Cave 8 is flanked by thirty-seven octagonal columns, from the apse till

the end of the hall, encircling the stupa completely (Craven 58). Seven pillars surrounding the stupa are plain octagonal shafts without a base or capital (Wauchope 43), representing Vishnu and the *Sangha* or the Buddhist brotherhood (Wauchope 12). The remaining thirty have capitals and vase-shaped bases on three-tiered plinths, their bases representing Lakshmi's bowl of abundance containing the nectar of immortality or *amrita*, the 'seed of life' (Wauchope 13). Of these, the eighth pillar on the right-hand side of the hall is sixteen-sided, bearing a dagoba on its north face (Wauchope 43). The fifth pillar on the left side of the Hall has a 'niche' in which the relics of a saint of Sopara are alleged to have been stored (Wauchope 43). The capitals have a faceted bell-shaped abacus, mounted by kneeling elephants, carrying regal pairs of men and women (Craven 58-59), signifying the great wealth and splendour of rulers who humbly kneeled before the Buddha's sacred shrine (Brown 25).

The chaitya window or arch provides illumination to the Buddhist relics and the dagoba. Shaped like a horseshoe, its interior pattern represents the rising sun or the 'dawn', taking inspiration from early thatched Bengal village hut roofs that distinctly resembled the shape of the Bodhi tree's sacred 'pipal' leaf (Wauchope 8). By retaining the 'horseshoe' shape, Cave 8 keeps its symbolism unchanged, thus maintaining the contemporary Hinayana principles and beliefs, combining its functional role with symbolism to embody the tenets of Hinayana Buddhism.

The stupa, the most important structure, is rather plain, emulating the 'curves' (Brown 22) of the arch with simple dignity. Its cylindrical base had two diminishing tiers, with two bands of railings, suggesting an 'upper and lower processional path' (Brown 25) around the stupa. The body of the stupa is surmounted by a *harmika* decorated with a rail pattern, above which stands a large wooden umbrella carved in the pattern of a lotus (Brown 25), symbolising the 'spiritual emperors of the Buddha' (Zimmer 251).

Even though the Hinayana sect rarely utilised sculptures, the external façade of Cave 8 has become somewhat 'lavish' (Zimmer 250). The façade has an abundance of elephant sculptures, which are precursors to the designs found at Kailashnath in Ellora. The doorway relief sculptures depict Buddha on lotus calyxes, explicit representation of Buddha that does not align with the Hinayana sect's beliefs (Zimmer 250). This indicates that over time, Mahayana influences, characterised by its emphasis on the decorative aspect and creation of idol imagery to represent the figurehead of their faith, began transforming the hall. However, the main hall remains free from any additional decorations, and therefore, the Karla chaitya can still be considered a piece of Hinayana architecture as it maintains the aniconic characteristic of the sect.

Despite the additional reliefs in the doorway and façade, Zimmer maintains that the Karla caves preserved the 'monumental, solemn character of early Buddhist art' (Zimmer 251). Cave 8 never lost its charm of simplicity. Each element served a functional and symbolic role, combining deep spirituality and structural ingenuity, encouraging a focus on introspection and self-reliance, and

revealing the profound sophistication in thought and application in Hinayana architecture.

Significance of the Karla chaitya:

All chaityas, ideal for congregational over individualistic worship, house the principal objects of devotion, the stupa and relics of Buddhism, protecting them from the climate while dedicating a set space for ritual and prayer. These prayer halls became the ‘focus of Buddhist spiritual life’ (Brown 26). Karla is no exception. The chaitya is the ‘touchstone’ (Grover 35) of ritual and worship in Buddhism, combining spiritual and personal needs. Karla itself has several viharas for providing shelter for its devotees, indicating the growing intersection of religion and communal living.

The Karla Caves and Cave 8 were major centers of Buddhist activity. The excavations were strategically positioned along important pilgrimage routes, ensuring a steady stream of pilgrims from India and abroad (Maharashtra Tourism). Karla was also part of an ancient network of caravan routes connecting commercial and religious centres from Suparaka (in present-day Sopara) in the north to Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh in the south (Asher 410). The chaityas of western India were intentionally concentrated along the Western Ghats’ streams and near retreats for ancient trade, to attract wealthy patrons (Craven 51).

Patrons donated generously to Karla. Inscriptions record Nahapana and his son-in-law Ushabhadata provided donations in land grants (Kail 110). Other inscriptions record the donations of wealthy patrons such as Haraphana, a Persian who lived under the reign of Gautamiputra of the Pulumavi Dynasty (Valisinha 230), Bhutapala, and King Devabhuti of the Sunga dynasty (Kail 110). This connection was a double advantage - pilgrims and patrons were be attracted to this religious site, whose donations in turn attracted more visitors. It is mainly through wealthy patronage that Cave 8 materialised as one of the finest works of architecture. A powerful promoter of the *Sangha*, Karla played one of the most significant roles in connecting India’s trade routes with the Hinayana sects while creating a network of patrons who assisted in the creation of Cave 8 and furthered economic prosperity in the region.

Conclusion:

The village of Vehargaon near Karla and the modern township of Lonavala or Lenauli (meaning an abundance of ‘lenas’ or caves) strongly indicates this region was a stronghold for Buddhism, with Karla being the centre of pilgrimage (Kail 111). From the initial conception of rock-cut chaityas till the culmination of all dynamic architectural features in Karla, Cave 8 was a source of economic and spiritual prosperity, possibly invigorating a new wave of Buddhism across India.

The history and rich symbolic background of the chaitya are a testament to the skill and craftsmanship of the Hinayana architects. From its humble origins in tree groves to the magnificent sophistication of Cave 8, Karla encompasses numerous innovations in scale, structure, and style into a masterpiece of architecture. This analysis demonstrates that the status of Cave 8 as the epitome of

Hinayana Buddhist artwork is not earned by virtue of a single feature, but through combining technical innovation and refinement in art, symbolism, and scale to produce the core beliefs of Hinayana spirituality. Ultimately, the Chaitya Hall of Karla is a sophisticated and highly engineered spiritual space that maintains the core Hinayana virtues of simplicity and introspection. It created a thriving community of traders, monks, and patrons, transcending its function from a mere prayer hall into a unifying structure that combined philosophical depth, devotion, and practice, making it the undisputed pinnacle of Hinayana rock architecture.

References:

1. 'Incredible India – Karla Caves', *Incredible India*, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, <https://www.incredibleindia.gov.in/en/maharashtra/pune/karla-caves>. Accessed 14th September 2025
2. 'Caves', *Maharashtra Tourism*, Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation, Government of Maharashtra, <https://maharashtratourism.gov.in/tourist-interests/caves/>. Accessed 14 September 2025
3. Asher, Frederick M., *Art of India: Prehistory to the Present*, Hong Kong, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2003
4. Brown, Percy, *Indian Architecture: Buddhist & Hindu Periods*, Bombay, D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. Private Ltd., 1971
5. Craven, Roy C., *A Concise History of Indian Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1976
6. Grover, Satish, *The Architecture of India: Buddhist and Hindu*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House Private Ltd., 1980
7. Kail, Owen C., *Buddhist Cave Temples of India*, Mumbai, D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. Private Ltd., 1975
8. Valisinha, Devapriya, *Buddhist Shrines in India*, Colombo, The Maha Bodhi Society of Ceylon, 1948
9. Wauchope, R. S., *Buddhist Cave Temples of India*, Calcutta, Calcutta General Printing Co. Ltd., 1933
10. Zimmer, Heinrich, *The Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformations*, edited by Joseph Campbell, vol. I, Bollingen series, New York, Bollingen Foundation, 1955