

# **Music Iconography Portrayed in South Asian Buddhist Arts (based on Ajanta Buddhist caves)**

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the iconographical evidence of music depicted in the Ajanta Buddhist caves and its significance in the history of Indian music. By applying descriptive and historical approaches to iconographical evidence, the research focuses on the identification, analysis, and interpretation of musical icons in Ajanta. The study addresses the following research question: What iconographical evidence of music is presented in the Ajanta caves, and how does it contribute to our understanding of India's musical history? The research examines the characteristics of musical instruments in Ajanta, including their structure, playing techniques, and performance contexts, as well as comparisons with similar depictions at other locations. This study meticulously surveys literary sources and archaeological findings qualitatively. Musical instruments depicted in Ajanta can be categorized into four types: string instruments (*Tata*), such as Lutes or Veena; percussion instruments (*Avanaddha*), including Drums and Cymbals; solid instruments (*Ghana*), referring to solid or metallic instruments; and wind instruments (*Sushira*), such as Flutes and Conches. The study concludes that the Ajanta caves provide significant evidence of music during

the relevant historical period, contributing to the historical evaluation of musical instruments and offering insights into Buddhist perspectives on music.

**Key Words:** *Ajanta caves, Music, Iconography, Buddhist Art*

## Introduction

Ajanta Caves are in the Aurangabad district of the state of Maharashtra, dating from the second century BCE to about 480 CE. 30 rock-cut Buddhist cave monuments are included there. The Ajanta Caves are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Universally regarded as masterpieces of Buddhist religious art, the caves include paintings and rock-cut sculptures described as the finest examples of ancient Indian art, particularly expressive paintings that convey emotion in gestures, postures, and form. This paper observes the various musical instruments that are depicted in the paintings. The significance of the musical instruments, the form of the music, the playing techniques, and the comparative study of the characteristics of the instruments with those depicted at other locations are studied in this research.

## Methodology

This research mainly bestows with Erwin Panofsky's (1892-1968) method of Iconology- Iconography (Erwin Panofsky, 1972, p. 5-7)

1. Primary, or natural subject matter – pre-iconographical description
2. Secondary or conventional subject matter – iconographical analysis
3. Intrinsic meaning, symbolical values – iconological interpretation

From the Iconographic Point of view, it achieves a fusion of anthropomorphic and abstract elements that fulfilled the aesthetic requirements of the literate and socio-cultural background of contemporary society (Jayadeva Mishra, 2015, p. 1). Iconography study has two types. (1) The descriptive study which is concerned mainly with the formal and physical features of the image studied concerning to the prescription corroborations available from tests' (2) The Historical study, which considers the various factors giving rise to and contributing to the gradual evolution of the different iconographic concepts (Mishra, 2015. P. 2). Thus, this study is concerned with both descriptive and historical approaches.

This qualitative research study followed the survey of literature and examination of archaeological information. The literature survey included library surveys, map studies, Tripitaka, Jataka, and scholarly studies. The archaeological examination was performed on structural (shape) evidence to identify and analyze the structure of Musical Instruments and other musical evidence in the engraved Ajanta caves.

## **Literature review**

### **Music in Buddhist Literature**

According to the Buddhist literature, the Veena features in different birth stories of Buddha, called Jataka that were assumed by compiled between the 3rd – 2nd Centuries BCE. The Jataka stories such as Guttala, Matsya, Bherivada, Vidura Pandita etc., mention the Veena in different contexts. The Guttala Jataka contains reference to the veena, having seven strings. In the Tripitaka, we found Sona Sutta and Sakka Panha Sutta also mentioned the Veena.

During the Buddha's first three decades, he was consistently immersed in music. As a young prince, he was restricted to three palaces, where he was surrounded by luxuries and accompanied by sensuous female musicians.

*‘passed the time with the noble music of singing women..  
. with tambourines whose frames were bound with  
gold and which sounded softly beneath the strokes of  
women's fingers, and with dances that rivalled those of  
the beautiful Apsarases. There the women delighted him  
with their soft voices, charming blandishments, playful  
intoxications...’* (Edward H. Johnston, p.13)

The Sona Sutta in the Anguttaranikaya uses the analogy of tuning a harp (veena) to explain the Buddha's philosophy of the middle path. Since Sona was a Veena player, the Buddha taught him about the middle path through the method of tuning the instrument, illustrating the balance required in life (Sona sutta-Bikkhu Sujato, AN.6.55). The dialogue between the Buddha and Sona goes as follows:

*“What do you think, Soṇa? When you were still a layman,  
weren't you a good player of the arched harp?”*

*“Yes, sir.”*

*“When your harp's strings were tuned too tight, was it  
resonant and playable?”*

*“No, sir.”*

*“When your harp's strings were tuned too slack, was it  
resonant and playable?”*

*“No, sir.”*

*“But when your harp's strings were tuned neither too  
tight nor too slack, but fixed at an even tension, was it  
resonant and playable?”*

*“Yes, sir.”*

*“In the same way, Soṇa, when energy is too forceful it  
leads to restlessness. When energy is too slack it leads  
to laziness. So, Soṇa, you should focus on energy and  
serenity, find a balance of the faculties, and learn the  
pattern of this situation”* (Sona sutta, AN.6.55).

The Sakka Panha Sutta in the Digha Nikaya tells the story of Panchasikha, the divine musician of King Sakka, who visited the Buddha. Panchasikha played his Veena and sang, sharing his music with the Buddha during their encounter (Sister Vajira, p.13). In Jataka No. 243, the Guttala Jataka, it is narrated that the Buddha had once lived as a renowned musician, playing the veena (arched harp) at the court of Benares. According to the story, the Veena he played had seven strings, as described in the text (BO LAWERGREN, p.228). The first chapter of the *Lankavatara Sutta* is titled 'Ravanadhyesana'. It begins by recounting how King Ravana, along with his retinue, visited the Buddha and performed on musical instrument Veena (lute) (Lankatara Sutta, 2002. Dharmasiri, Gunapala, (ed.), p.69).

Music plays a significant role in Buddhist literature, particularly in the depiction of the Buddha's life and teachings. Various texts, such as the Tripitaka, Jataka stories, and Suttas, intertwine music with spiritual lessons, showcasing how the Buddha's experiences with music—from his early life as a prince to his use of musical analogies—helped convey philosophical concepts like balance and the middle path.

### **Pioneers of the study**

Hiuen T'sang in the 7th century CE mentioned these caves in his works (A. Ghosh, 1966, p.1). Ajanta was rediscovered in 1819 by John Smith and his companies from the Madras Regiment (Dulari Qureshi, 2012, p. xxv). The book named 'Ajanta Part I' written by G. Yazdani (1930) provided wide information about the Jataka tales and the paintings in detail. The descriptions of the paintings done by Yazdani also provide musical evidence for the Ajanta paintings. The consistent research on Ajanta (Ajanta, Ellora, and Aurangabad Caves) was done by Ramesh Shankar Gupta and B.D. Mahajan (1962) expanded the details of the Ajanta paintings and Buddhist arts. The book *Paintings in the Buddhist Cave-Temple of Ajanta* by John Griffiths (1983) described comprehensively the contents of the Ajanta paintings.

Walter M. Spink (1990) provides a brief history and guidance about Ajanta in his book *Ajanta: A Brief History and Guide*. The book 'My Pilgrimage to Ajanta and Bagh, written by Sri Mukul Chandra Day (1925), comparatively describes the paintings of Ajanta and Bagh. Lady Herringham (1915) *Ajanta Frescoes*, Madan Jeet Singh (1965) *Ajanta: Ajanta painting of the sacred and the secular*, Rajesh Kumar Singh (2012), *An introduction to the Ajanta caves: With examples of six caves*, and Mahinda Somathilake (2016) *Ajanta Murals and their Chronology*, have produced scholarly works and provided Critical Analysis, on Ajanta. However, it seems that the research on the Ajanta has focused on different objectives other than musical evidence.

The present study is expected to address the following research question: 'What is the iconographical evidence that is related to the music display in Ajanta Buddhist caves and its significance as a source for music history in India?

Examining the characteristics of musical instruments in Ajanta with those depicted at other locations, whether the musical instrument in Ajanta displays any combination with Buddhism was also examined in this research. The developed Hypothesis of this research is that "Ajanta Buddhist cave's arts significantly provide sources for history of Indian Music".

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The Musical instruments portrayed in Ajanta:**

Musical instruments portrayed in the Ajanta caves can be classified into four types as string instruments (*Tata*), Percussion instruments (*Avanaddha*), Solid instruments (*Ghana*) and Wind Instruments (*Suṣira*). The Stringed ones are with strings, the Percussion (covered) means the drums, the Solid are the cymbals, and the Wind Instruments (hollow) mean the flutes (*Natyashastra*, Chapter XXVIII).

## **Strings Instrument**

A Kinnara is playing a string Instrument (Kachhapi Veena?) (Fig. 01) depicted in Padmapani panel, Cave No.1. Around the figure of Padmapani Bodhisattva there are Gods, Gandharva, and Kinnara etc. (the Gandharva and Kinnara (or celestial musicians) are known as semi-god and semi-human with the human bust and birds' claws (Amina Okada; Jean-Louis Nou, 1996, p. 106). The Kinnara with the Lute or Veena is depicted behind the figure of Padmapani in cave no.1. Similar figures can also be observed in a stone sculpture in Cave No. 4 (Fig. 02) and the upper part of the entrance door frame in Cave No. 01 (Fig. 03). In these depictions, the figure is shown playing the veena with his right hand, while his left hand's fingers rest on the fingerboard. This portrayal offers insight into stringed instruments' historical evolution and playing techniques.



**Fig. 01**



**Fig. 03**



**Fig. 03**

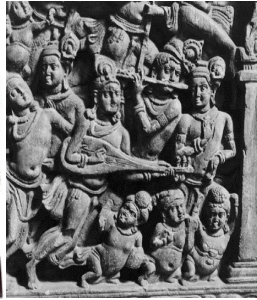
Those harp players (Kinnaras or Gandharva) play their instrument (like modern Sarod) in the same position. They handle the fingerboard (it looks like it doesn't have frets) with their left hand and pluck the strings with their right hand. Stringed instruments with short necks, like Ajanta can also be found in other Buddhist Arts which are belonging to a similar period of Gandharan relief (Fig.04) Amaravathi (Fig.05), Nagarjuna Konda (Fig.06), Loriyan Tangai (Fig. 07) reliefs and Chukhil-I-Ghoundi Stupa (Fig.08). These stringed instruments are plucked with the fingers or by using a small plectrum. According to the Characteristics of Kashmir Rabab and modern Sarod in India



belong to this instrument group.



**Fig. 04**



**Fig. 05**



**Fig. 06**



**Fig. 07**



**Fig. 08**

The other type of stringed instrument in Ajanta caves features a bow or harp shape which is depicted in the upper part decoration of the entrance door and outside wall decorations of cave no.01 (Fig.09, 10) and inside wall upper part of the musicians' depictions on cave no. 02 (Fig.11).



**Fig. 09**



**Fig. 10**



**Fig. 11**



In these scenes, the first and second harp players are shown handling the fingerboard with their left hand and playing the strings with their right hand, while the third player is seen oppositely holding the harp. This posture is similar to that of modern harps and svarmandal. The bow-shaped harp is a prominent feature in various ancient Buddhist art sculptures, including those from Bharhut (2nd century BCE), Sanchi (3rd century BCE), Pitalkhora (2nd century BCE), Mathura (1st–3rd century CE), and Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka (2nd–3rd century CE).

### **Percussion and Solid Instruments**

In Cave No. 1, a visual representation of the MahaJanaka Jataka tale depicts a female dancer accompanied by musicians playing various instruments (Fig. 12). The orchestra consists of more than five performers, with two flute players on the right side of the dancer, two cymbal players, one female musician playing a pair of vertical drums, another playing a small double drum (with a narrow ring in the middle), and a musician holding a stringed instrument, possibly a gourd-like instrument. Additionally, Cave No. 1 represents three musical instruments: a flute, a conch (seashell horn), and a drum (similar to the Mridang) (Fig.13). Cave No. 17, which depicts God Indra with his celestial musicians (Fig. 14), also showcases four female musicians, including a flutist.



**Fig. 12**



**Fig. 13**



**Fig. 14**

The small double drum, with a narrow ring in the middle, held by the female musician in Figure No. 12, resembles the Timila, a drum traditionally used in South India (Fig. 15). Other depictions of two drum players are found on the outside wall of Cave No. 1 (Fig. 16), where the drums take the shape of the Mridang, with two faces of similar size. The drummers play the instrument with both hands while keeping it in their lap. Additionally, a small drum with a short body and decorative elements is depicted in the wall paintings inside Cave No. 2 (Fig. 17). This drum has two faces, with the left-hand side face being larger than the right-hand side face.



**Fig. 15**



**Fig. 16**



**Fig. 17**

## **Wind Instruments**

The depiction of wind instruments like flutes and conchs in the Ajanta Caves highlights the significance of music in ancient Indian art and culture. These instruments are often associated with divine or symbolic meanings, and their representation in these caves serves as

a fascinating glimpse into the cultural and religious life during the time of their creation. In Cave No. 1, the two female flutists are shown in connection with the MahaJanaka Jataka (Fig.12). This Jataka tale, which is part of Buddhist literature, narrates the story of the previous birth of the Buddha, where King MahaJanaka demonstrates great virtues. The presence of flutists in this depiction may represent harmony, divine music, or spiritual transcendence, as music was often used in ancient India to convey sacred or heavenly realms.

The painting depicting the arrival of the king (Cave No. 1) is a vivid portrayal of an important cultural and spiritual event, where the conch (shankha) and the flute stand out as symbols of deep religious and cultural meaning (Fig.13). Moving on to Cave No. 17 (depiction of God Indra and his disciples), the flute player's depiction suggests that music, especially wind instruments, was an important part of the artistic narrative and might symbolize the interplay between music and spirituality (Fig.14). Cave No. 19 (Fig.18) and Cave No. 1 (Fig.19) could refer to significant evidence for wind instruments in the Ajanta Caves, The flute players depicted in these carvings could symbolize important cultural, spiritual, or musical aspects of the people who created them.



**Fig. 18**



**Fig. 19**

## **Conclusion**

The Ajanta Caves indeed provide a fascinating glimpse into the cultural and social dynamics of ancient India, particularly in terms of music, gender roles, and the intersection of art and religion. The murals and sculptures found within these caves, dating from around the 2nd century BCE to the 6th century CE, offer valuable insights into the religious, artistic, and everyday life of the time, with music playing a prominent role. The depictions of musicians in the Ajanta Caves reflect the vibrant musical culture of ancient India. The caves feature numerous murals and sculptures illustrating musicians playing a variety of instruments, both stringed and percussion, solid and wind instruments. These depictions are not only artistic representations but also offer historical evidence of the types of music performed during the period. Through these images, we can deduce that music was an essential part of religious rituals, possibly used in meditation or in the worship of deities, as well as in cultural or courtly events.

The role of women in the musical depictions at Ajanta is particularly noteworthy. Unlike many other ancient cultures, where women's contributions to music were often marginalized or overlooked, the murals at Ajanta reveal that women were not only involved in music but were portrayed as skilled musicians. Women are depicted playing various instruments such as the lute (Veena), flute, and drum, often alongside male musicians. This highlights the significant role of women in the cultural and musical life of the time. These depictions suggest a relatively egalitarian view of women in society, particularly in the realm of artistic expression. It is possible that women were involved in religious or court music and that their musical performances were not limited to private spheres but could also be part of public or ritual events. This is significant, as it contrasts with the more restrictive gender roles that would emerge in later periods of Indian history.

The musical representations in the Ajanta Caves are not just an aesthetic or artistic element but reflect the broader sociocultural and religious contexts of the time. Music in Buddhist art often carries

spiritual significance. It is intertwined with meditation practices, rituals, and the idealized depiction of a harmonious, balanced society. The inclusion of musicians in the murals suggests that music was viewed as an integral part of achieving spiritual enlightenment or of enhancing the sacredness of the space. The Ajanta Caves themselves, with their monastic architecture and intricate artwork, were likely designed to create an immersive environment for meditation and religious practice, where music played a role in guiding the mind toward spiritual transcendence. The musical imagery in the Ajanta Caves provides a wealth of information about the music, gender roles, and social dynamics of ancient India. It not only illustrates the instruments and musical traditions of the time but also offers a unique insight into the status and role of women in ancient Indian society. The presence of both male and female musicians highlights the inclusive nature of the musical culture, where music transcended gender boundaries and was an essential part of religious, cultural, and social life. The depictions of music at Ajanta are therefore crucial in understanding both the historical development of Indian music and the sociocultural environment in which it flourished.

### **Table of Figures**

01. A Kinnara is playing a string Instrument (Kachhapi Vina?), depicted in Padmapani (also known as the “Beautiful Bodhisattva”-before enlightenment Buddha was known as Bodhisattva) panel, Cave No.1, Ajanta caves
02. The Kinnara with the Lute or Vina is depicted behind the figure of Padmapani in cave no.1. Furthermore, a similar figure can be seen in a stone sculpture in cave no.4, Ajanta caves.
03. Harp Player, Ajanta, Cave no.01, entrance door upper part, captured by author.
04. Gandhara, 2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> century, <https://www.saffronart.com/auctions/postwork.aspx?l=19917>
05. Harp player, Amaravati, National museum, Calcutta.
06. Harp Player, Nagarjunakonda, National museum, Calcutta
07. Gautama playing on a harp (veena?), Lorian Tangai-Pakistan: schist stone (displays in Calcutta museum)

08. Chakhil-i-Ghoundi Stupa-Peshawar museum a stone slab depicts Prince Siddhartha enjoying worldly life where we have representation of the drum, flute and the harp; Suchandra Ghosh, p.48
09. Harp player, entrance door upper part decorations, cave no.01, captured by author.
10. Harp player, outside wall upper side, cave no.01. captured by author.
11. Harp player, inside wall upper side, cave no.02, captured by author.
12. 1. Ajanta painting by Robert Gill, Museum no. IS.53-1885.V&S : 2. Maha Janaka Jataka, Cave no.01, Yazdani, G. 1930–1955. *Ajanta: The Colour and Monochrome Reproductions of the Ajanta Frescoes Based on Photography*. London: Oxford University Press. 4 volumes. Vol. 1, plates XII–XIV.
- 13,14. <https://www.indian-heritage.org/painting/ajanta/ajanta15.html>
15. Timila drum, South India: Raja Dinkar Kelkar museum, pune. Captured by author.
16. Two drum players , on the outside wall of Cave No. 1, captured by author.
17. Small drum, inside wall paintings of cave no.2, captured by author.
18. Flute player, inside wall sculpture, cave no.19, Captured by author
19. Flute player, Entrance door upper side, cave no.1, captured by author

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