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Trade Routes, Religion and Cultural Exchange in Mumbai: Through Ancient Sculptural Art and Architecture

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Abstract
Mumbai Metropolitan Region has around 5000 heritage sites dating from prehistoric to modern times. Notably, we have 3 World Heritage Sites, 226 caves, 52 forts, and much more. Mumbai's heritage spans from prehistoric sites to modern structures (such as Art Deco architecture) and from defence structures to religious monuments. This heritage provides insight into human society and traditions, while art and architecture reflect society's artistic expression. This artistic expression reveals humanity's aesthetics in its time, space, and cultural context. Every sculpture, sculptural panel and architectural style narrates the story of the human mind, life and migration. Through these material remains, we can understand polity, society, economy, and religion. In this paper, the author focuses primarily on monumental sites such as the Elephanta caves, Kanheri caves, Mandapeshwar caves, Jogeshwari caves, and Mahakali caves, as well as sculptural findings from Baradevi (Parel), Sopara, and BARC. This study attempts to understand cultural relations between distant places and the Mumbai metropolitan region with reference to religion and culture.
***Keywords**: Cultural Exchange, Mumbai, Trade, Sculptural Art and Architecture*

Introduction

Religion, Cultural Interaction and its Sculptural Evidences

Religion played a meaningful role in shaping the vibrant cultural interactions in the Mumbai region. The region's remarkable rock-cut cave complexes were more than isolated monuments; they were part of wider religious and cultural networks, connected beautifully through trade routes, patronage, and monastic activities. During the early historic period, Buddhism flourished in the area, with the Kanheri Caves standing out as one of western India's largest Buddhist monastic centres. With over one hundred excavations, including viharas, chaitya halls, and water management systems, Kanheri was a lively hub of Buddhist learning, meditation, and community life. Inscriptions at the site show that merchants, traders, and devoted pilgrims who travelled along nearby trade routes generously donated to support the monastic community. Wonderful is that Kanheri was connected to other small cave sites across the region, forming a vibrant network rather than standing alone. Take the Mahakali Caves, for example, another peaceful Buddhist monastic site that was part of this larger web of Buddhist sites in Mumbai, including Kanheri.



Fig.1 Chapel at Mandapeshwar

Sculptures and icons provide evidence of culture, tradition, dynastic rule, art style, and more. These panels and individual sculptures reveal Mumbai's rich culture and past. Religious and cultural exchanges are evident in art, architecture, and iconography. Some references to these sculptures and sculptural panels are given below in a segregated format by religion:

- **Buddhist sculptures:**

The Kanheri Caves provide important evidence of cultural interaction and mingling in the Mumbai region, especially in Cave No. 3,

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where various elements show connections to distant places. A key example is the figure wearing a Scythian cap, associated with Central Asian populations. This theme is common in regions under *Kushan* rule. This points to interaction with Central Asian culture, likely through long-distance trade routes. Another important figure is the double-humped camel, associated with Central Asia and the trans-Himalayan regions. These camels are depicted in regions such as Kashmir and Central Asia, suggesting awareness of the wider trade routes connecting these regions to the western part of the Indian subcontinent. The Mathura Buddha figure in the Kanheri Caves is associated with the Mathura School of Art. (Pandit S. 2020, pg. 34) The body modelling, posture and stylistic treatment resemble characteristics of the Mathura school, suggesting the transmission of artistic ideas and sculptural models from northern India to the western coast. Another interesting feature is the donor couples depicted in Cave 3. These figures may represent patrons connected to trade networks who supported Buddhist establishments in the region. The ornaments worn by these donor figures also provide archaeological insights. For example, the donor couples' earrings resemble ornaments found in excavations at Ter, an important Satavahana-period site. This similarity suggests connections between the Mumbai region and the Deccan trade centres during the Satavahana period. Cave No. 3 also depicts a Griffin, a mythical creature associated with Greek mythology. Most of these elements suggest links between various sites and Central Asia (Pandit S. 2013, pg.23), which lie along major trade routes. This motif reflects the influence of Hellenistic artistic ideas that entered the Indian subcontinent through earlier Indo-Greek and Central Asian interactions. Beyond the sculptural objects, both the Kanheri and Mahakali caves (*Kondivite*) feature narrative scenes depicting the Miracle of *Shravasti*, which relates to the wonders ascribed to the Buddha there. The architectural objects in Kanheri also reveal their connection to other important Buddhist centres across India.

One of the most striking examples is Cave No. 41, which depicts a magnificent sculpture of *Avalokiteshvara* with eleven heads. This deity is also associated with *Padmapani Avalokiteshvara* and represents a highly advanced stage in *Mahayana* iconography. The eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara also acquired tremendous importance in Buddhist traditions and is particularly revered at various sites, including Tibet. Also, another important sculptural panel in Buddhist art, visible in the Mumbai region, is the *Shravasti* miracle panel. This panel can be seen in various caves at Kanheri and at the *Kondivate* caves (Mahakali caves), a satellite monastery in the Mumbai region. (Pandit S. 2013, pg.73)







Griffin and sculptures of Bactrian camel, Cave No. 3, Kanheri Caves.

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Shravasti miracle panel, Kanheri caves and Mahakali caves



Tibetan Eleven-headed *Avalokiteśvara* & Eleven-headed *Avalokiteśvara*, Kanheri Caves

The discovery at Sopara, a major port in ancient times, provides valuable information about cultural exchange. As a major maritime trade hub, Sopara connected India's western coast to distant lands. The sculptural fragments and archaeological objects found at the site suggest a variety of religious traditions and art forms introduced through maritime trade. Beyond the specific sites mentioned, the discovery of sculptural fragments near the BARC indicates the presence of ancient sculptures from various religious traditions. The discovery indicates the multiculturalism of the Mumbai region. The iconography, style, and craftsmanship suggest influence from art traditions beyond the local region. Migration along trade, pilgrimage, and patronage routes contributed to the exchange of artistic traditions (Pandit S. 2020, pg. 25). The presence of such a sculpture in Kanheri reveals the spread of *Vajrayana* ideas and also its connection to other Buddhist traditions across India and beyond. In other words, the sculpture and architecture of Kanheri reveal its deep involvement in the larger traditions of Indian and Buddhist art and architecture. Through trade and pilgrimage routes, and the movement of monks and artists, concepts and ideas related to art and architecture from different parts of India and beyond entered the artistic tradition of the caves.

Shaiva sculptures:

Elephanta Caves, Mandapeshwar Caves, and Jogeshwari Cave are some of the rock-cut cave sites in Mumbai. The Pashupata Shaivism sect follows *Pashupatinath* and the teachings of *Lakulisha*. This sect can be seen as parallel to the spread of Buddhism. As a result, we see several similarities in these structures and sculptures. One example is the Mandapeshwar caves, where the Lakulisha panel parallels the *Shravasti* miracle panel of the Buddha. These sculptures show religious artistic exchange. There is also a panel of *Natesha,* or *Nataraja,* in the form of Shiva.



Lakulisha Panel at Mandapeshwar caves & *Shravasti* miracle panel of the Buddha, Mahakali caves

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We can see similar sculptures at these various sites like Mandapeshwar, Elephanta, and Jogeshwari. *Dwarpalas* are the most common sculptures that we can see in these structures. Even at Mandapeshwar, we can see missing *dwarpala* sculptures almost the same height as at the Jogeshwari and Elephanta caves. One notable example of this development in sculpture is the Elephanta Caves. In the city of caves, grand sculptures dedicated to the *Shaiva* tradition appear, such as Shiva's *Trimurti*. The work's dimensions, arrangement, and style all speak to a high level of refinement in the art of making.

Another notable instance is the *Baradevi* Temple, where ancient sculptural fragments have been discovered. We can also find traces of various ancient Shaivite temples at Parol, Sopara, Tungareshwar, Medhe, etc. Ambarnath Shiv Temple and *Chakreshwar Madhadev* Temple are examples. Ambarnath temple features various sculptures, including *Nataraja*, *Gajantaka*, and *Chamunda*. Sopara's *Chakreshwar Madhadev* also features sculptures of *Surya*, *Harihar*, *Surasundari (Shukasarika)*, Brahma, and many more. A similar Brahma sculpture can be found in *Shristhanak*, an ancient name for Thane. This indicates that Mumbai's art scene was not isolated from the wider Indian art scene in the ancient period. (Pandit S. 2013, pg.73)



Surasundari (Shukasarika) and Brahma sculpture, *Chakreshwar Madhadev*

- **Jain Sculpture**

Jain temples are among the most important sites in the historical trade networks, as the Jain community has long been associated with trade. The prosperity of the Jain traders is also reflected in the rich patronage of temples and religious sites. *Aagashi* is an important site associated with Jainism, as temple fragments, sculptural remains, and bronze objects reflect the Jain community's affluence in the region. These objects not only reflect artistic excellence but also indicate a well-established trade network in the region. (Pandit S. 2020, pg. 34)



Jain bronzes from Aagashi

Architectural Evidence of Cultural Exchange

There are caves where rock-cut forms have been carved to resemble older wooden architectural features, such as toranas and the basic frames of the structures. Although the original wooden structures may no longer exist, the rock-cut forms of these older features resemble those found at the Sanchi Stupa. The chaitya and vihara styles at the Kanheri Caves resemble those at the Karla Caves and the Ajanta Caves. This suggests that the Kanheri Caves were also a part of the Buddhist monastic network. The most obvious comparison between the Kanheri Caves and other rock-cut caves is Cave No. 11 at

Kanheri, which has a design similar to Cave No. 5 at Ellora. A Buddhist stupa in the Sopara area represents more than religion; it signifies both a thriving maritime trade centre and a spiritual centre associated with Buddhist activity. The Buddhist stupa represents the area as a crossroads for the spread of religion and for trade that went hand in hand. These centres brought together merchants and spiritual leaders and helped create religious sites that merchants could support through their activities. Caves like the Elephanta Caves, Mandapeshwar Caves, and Jogeshwari Caves also share architectural similarities.

Further signs of cultural exchange appear at the Vasai Fort region, which was under Gujarat Sultanate and Portuguese rule. In later periods, builders used features of older Hindu temples in the fort's construction. The reuse of temple architectural fragments within the fort walls demonstrates how earlier cultural and religious materials were incorporated into later colonial constructions. Sculptural remains from the Mumbai region provide important evidence for understanding cultural exchange and artistic interaction in ancient times. These sculptures not only reflect religious beliefs but also show the movement of artistic styles, iconographic traditions, and artisans across regions. Some grave markers feature the sun and moon, important symbols in Indian religious and cultural traditions. Their presence on grave markers and monuments clearly indicates that local art continually evolved and assimilated new architectural forms, especially during the colonial period. The sculptures still present in Mumbai clearly show cultural exchange at work, coupled with religious fervour.

So, from ancient times to the present, we can see various religious and cultural exchanges. These architectures show the connections between religion and cultural exchange in Mumbai, largely through trade and trading communities. These trading communities brought not only their religion and culture but also artistic beauty to the region, which blended further, creating a vast cultural landscape and an international trading hub.

Trade Routes and Cultural Exchange in Mumbai

The emergence of religious cults and their complexes around Mumbai is closely linked to the flourishing trade activities that crisscrossed India's Western coast. These religious sites sat at strategic crossroads near vital trade centres, markets, and routes linking coastal commerce to inland centres on the Deccan Plateau. For example, take Sopara, an ancient Western coast port. This was not an ordinary commercial centre; it was a hub connected to markets across the Arabian Sea, which then fed into India's markets. Through these commercial centres, traders, travellers, and monks could move goods, ideas, and art from one place to another. It was not limited to coastal commercial centres. Inland markets also played an equally significant role, linking sea routes to inland routes that crossed the Western Ghats and could also be traced to the Silk Route. Kalyan and Thane were notable inland commercial centres, which linked sea trade to inland trade. These commercial centres facilitated the free movement of goods, ideas, and art between coastal and inland centres. The wealth accumulated through these trade routes was directly utilised to develop religious centres in and around Mumbai. Merchants and guilds contributed to the development of monasteries and temples through charity, which funded the construction of caves, sculptures, and architecture. The influence of these trade routes is evident in the sculptures and architecture of the Kanheri Caves, Elephanta Caves, Jogeshwari Caves, Mandapeshwar Caves, Aagashi, and other sites. The influence of foreign motifs and varied forms of artwork on these caves indicates that the region was an active part of the cultural route. (Dhavalikar M. 2016, pg.)

The extent of the trade networks is evident in the presence around the ancient trade centre of Sopara, one of the most important on the western coast. Inland from the site, the Agashi site demonstrates the Jain community's impact on the area. Traditionally, the Jains were important players in long-distance trade, and the development of religious and architectural sites often accompanied their economic power. The surviving religious sites indicate how trade groups

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shaped the religious and cultural landscape near major trade centres. As traders moved into new areas, they carried their religious and architectural traditions, creating a mix of religious practices across the region. The area's cultural significance around Sopara is evident in archaeological material demonstrating the site's religious and trade importance.

Cultural activity in the region is evident at Nirmal, where archaeologists have found sculptures and temple remnants. This suggests the region was home to important spiritual centres linked to cultural and trade activity in the region and along the western coast. Today, you can still catch glimpses of the past in the area through coins and other pottery scattered throughout the region. This suggests the region was a crossroads of cultural and trade activity. Further evidence of cultural activity appears at Nirmal, where archaeologists have discovered several sculptures and temple remains. These findings indicate that the region once hosted important religious establishments connected with broader cultural and trade networks of the western coast. Even today, archaeological traces such as coins and pottery sherds can occasionally be found in the surrounding landscape. These material remains indicate continuous human activity in the area and highlight the region's historical importance as a centre of trade and settlement. The presence of such artefacts further supports the idea that Sopara and its surrounding settlements functioned as vibrant hubs of economic and cultural interaction.

Traders were instrumental in developing and sustaining religious sites. This is because they linked commerce and religion. Traders were the primary agents facilitating cultural exchange. Traders were instrumental in the growth of religious institutions. This is because traders were the primary patrons who funded the construction and maintenance of monasteries and temple complexes. This connection between traders and the growth of religion is evident in inscriptions that document their contributions. In some instances, traders' contributions are evident in icons and images of the gods. In some instances, traders' sculptures have been observed. Therefore, archaeological evidence from Sopara, Agashi, Kanheri, Elephanta and other sites reveals how trading centres and market towns contributed to the development of the region's religion, artistry, and architecture in the Mumbai region. These crossroads shaped the historical narrative of India's western coast.



Donor couple sculpture, Cave No. 3, Kanheri

Conclusion

Mumbai's architectural and sculptural heritage shows a strong relationship among religion, cultural interaction, and trade. In the ancient era, Mumbai was a crucial hub for interaction among different trading groups because of its position on an important maritime route. In this region, Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism have been prominent, especially because trading groups patronised them. This patronage was not limited to religious belief; it also included expressing those beliefs through the construction of temples, caves, and other art forms that reflect the economic prosperity of the people involved. Christianity was also added to the region's cultural heritage during the Portuguese era. This added a new dimension to the region's cultural heritage. Many changes were made to the existing architecture to suit the needs and convenience of the colonial powers. Still, they did not disrupt the region's natural cultural development.

The traders played an important role in the development of these religious centres. This established a strong connection between traders and these religious centres. In many cases, these inscriptions mention their donations and patronage. In some cases, donations were also recorded not in writing but in the form of an icon

of a god or an image of the traders themselves. They were the major benefactors of these centres.

The topic of this paper is a vast area of study; hence, the research notes only the most important sites. As the city has been an important centre on trade routes from the ancient to the medieval and even the colonial periods, interactions between communities have been continuous and inevitable. Therefore, the sculptures and architecture stand as strong evidence that trade not only drove progress and development, but also that religions, art, and cultures blended and intermingled. They do portray the city's development.



Grave at Vasai Fort engraved with sun and Moon, symbolising merging of religious beliefs.

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