

ROCKHEWN MONUMENTS OF KARKUNDA

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The Rock-hewn Monuments of Karkunda : At a distance of about three miles from Kottagudam Railway Station there is a small hill called Karkunda. During my tour in this area I learnt that there are some rock carvings in the hill. Consequently I explored the hill and discovered at the foot of its north-western slope the remains of two Buddhist Dagobas and two cells which have been carved out of sand rocks. These remains are not pretentious but they are important as they are the first of their type to be discovered in the Telugu speaking districts of H.E.H. the Nizam's Dominions.

During my short visit nothing could be found at the place which may help us in attributing a precise date to these monuments. But as they represent the Mahayana cult of the Buddhist religion, which came into vogue in or about first century A.D., these relics cannot be earlier. From the style of the sculptures carved in the niches of the Dagobas and in the cells it appears that they might have been hewn out in or about second or third century A.D. The Dagobas and the cells have suffered considerably from the ravages of time and weather. They are overgrown with rank vegetation. Tall trees that have grown into the crevices or depression of the rock have at some places split it and left the monuments in a precarious state of preservation.

Beginning from north ; first there is a big boulder about eight feet higher than the surrounding level and eight feet in diameter. This boulder had been carved into the shape of a Dagoba (Plate I) with a six-inch broad offset which runs all-round. On each cardinal side there is a niche in which the figure of the Buddha is to be seen in full relief seated on Padma Asana (Lotus throne) in a meditative mood. From the small patches of paint, it appears that in their pristine days the inside of these niches was painted. Somehow a tall tree has sprung up on the northern ridge of the Dagoba. The result as could be expected is disastrous. It has caused considerable damage to the northern niche and a big portion of the boulder which was just above the niche has fallen down and is lying close by. This injurious tree is to be carefully and immediately removed and its roots should be treated with chemicals that may check its future growth.

To the south-west of the first Dagoba at a distance of about forty feet, there is another boulder which has been shaped like a Dagoba. Owing to weathering the shape has been very much altered. This Dagoba has got a niche only in the western side, which has been considerably hollowed out from inside. On the eastern wall of the niche a figure of the Buddha has been carved, while on the southern side there is another small figure of the Buddha which is being blessed by his mother Maya. The figure of this lady is at least three times larger than that of the Buddha. The face of the lady has been much damaged, great æsthetic sense has been displayed in the portrayal of the contours of the body and the folds of the drapery.

Unfortunately it is located in a covered portion of the niche and is not easy to be photographed.

At a distance of about one hundred feet from the Dagoba due south-east, there are two cells facing the west which have been cut out of a single piece of rock. The approach to these cells was overgrown with shrubs and bushes. It was after cutting them down that I could get admission into the cells, the northern cell is rectangular in plan and measures nine feet north-south and six feet east-west, the roof being about six and a half feet higher than the floor. The walls are sculptured although figures have been very much damaged. The eastern wall bears the figure of the Buddha with a Chauri-bearer on each side. The northern and southern sides of the wall bear the life size figures of Dwarpalas carved in the conventional form, claiming some artistic merit. But the ravages of time and the weathering of the rock has deprived them of their original charm.

Immediately to the south of the first cell is the other. In plan it is similar to the first but of smaller dimensions, measuring 6 feet north to south and five feet east to west, the height being only five and a half feet. The arrangement of the sculptures is also nearly the same as in the first cell.

The wall surfaces and the sculptures of the cells and the niches in the Dagobas were originally painted. Traces of it can be seen even to this day in small patches. The process is slightly different from that of Ajanta. At Karkunda no earthen plaster has been used, but a thin coat of lime has been applied directly to the rock and then the surface was painted according to the requirements of the artist.

Among the colours traces of green, orange, yellow and black can still be seen. Unfortunately the patches that survive are extremely small in size.

The Art of the Sculptor : The number of sculptures at Karkunda is small. But they display a highly developed art. The four Buddhas in the niches of Dagoba No. 1 and the figure of Maya in Dagoba No. 2 are elegant specimens of sculptor's art. The tall Chauri-bearers in the cells are typical examples of the conventional and graceful curves of the body with which figures of developed Mahayana art are usually adorned. For the above reasons it may be very likely that these pieces of art might have been executed at a time when Mahayana Art had fully developed.

These relics of Buddhist culture in the Telugu speaking districts of H.E.H. the Nizam deserve careful conservation and preservation. The question may be discussed in detail when it is taken up. But at present it is necessary to mention that immediate steps should be taken to remove the rank vegetation from above and around the monuments and stop its future growth. Steps should also be taken for the proper drainage of rain water. It appeared to me that there is no proper outlet for the rain water which gets in the cells through the entrances. Water should not be allowed to accumulate on the top of these monuments and around their base.

The entrances to the cells should be fitted with perforated doors, so that the air inside may not become foul by getting stagnated. The entrances have got sockets which show that once they were fitted with doors. Barbed wire may be put around the Dagobas. This may help in saving the beautiful images of the Buddha from being subjected to vandalism. In the best interest of the monuments the appointment of a chowkidar is most desirable. To the south-east of the hill is a stream. The area between the hill and the stream is very interesting. Although it has been under cultivation since very long, yet even to this day we can pick up old potsherds, and brickbats in large quantities in this area. The presence of brickbats aroused my curiosity and upon inquiries it was disclosed that even large size bricks are also sometimes available in the field. As a matter of fact, I myself could see in the house of Mr. Gopal Rao, Deshmukh of Hemachandrapuram, some bricks which measured $1' \times 7'' \times 2\frac{1}{2}''$. It is quite likely that excavations between the hills and the stream and at some other suitable sites in the vicinity may yield valuable results.



(a) DAGOBA NO. 1 AT KARKUNDA



(b) THE CELLS AT KARKUNDA

