

Decoding Ajanta: The Socio-Cultural Significance of Attire in Depicting Community Harmony

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Abstract

Communal harmony refers to the peaceful and respectful coexistence of different communities and cultures within a society. Historically, dress has been a powerful visual indicator of social status, caste class, occupation and even religion. Sumptuary laws, common in many ancient and medieval societies, explicitly dictated what different social strata could wear, reinforcing hierarchies. The Ajanta Caves, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Maharashtra, India, offer an unparalleled visual chronicle of life in ancient India (circa 2nd century BCE to 6th century CE). Beyond their profound religious significance as Buddhist monastic complexes, the murals provide invaluable insights into the

social, cultural, and economic milieu of the Vakataka and Gupta periods. This paper explores the depiction of dress code in the Ajanta paintings as a lens to understand aspects of community harmony. By analyzing the variety, quality, and context of attire worn by different figures from royalty and nobility to commoners, monks, and servants this research aims to identify how clothing signifies social stratification, cultural assimilation, and potentially, the peaceful coexistence of diverse groups within the portrayed society. The study employs a visual semiotic approach, examining recurring patterns, symbolic elements, and the interplay of dress with other visual cues to infer the presence and nature of community harmony.

Keywords: Ajanta Caves, ancient India, community harmony, dress code, mural paintings, social hierarchy

Introduction

Art, throughout history, has served as a powerful mirror reflecting the societies that create it. The Ajanta Caves, with their breathtaking murals, stand as a testament to this truth. These rockcut cave temples, adorned with intricate paintings and sculptures, are not merely religious narratives but a

vivid panorama of daily life, courtly grandeur, and spiritual aspirations of ancient India. While much scholarship has focused on the religious and artistic aspects of Ajanta, the social dimensions embedded within these visual records often warrant deeper exploration. This paper proposes to examine a specific, yet often overlooked, aspect, the dress

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code depicted in the Ajanta paintings, and how it might illuminate the concept of community harmony during the period.

Clothing, in any society, is more than just utilitarian. It is a powerful signifier of identity, status, occupation, and cultural belonging. By meticulously observing the attire of the various figures in the Ajanta murals – kings, queens, courtesans, merchants, monks, soldiers, and common folk – we can uncover subtle cues about social stratification, economic prosperity, and the ways in which different societal groups interacted. The central premise of this research is that even within a hierarchical society, the visual representation of dress can provide insights into the degree of social cohesion, mutual understanding, and peaceful coexistence, which collectively contribute to community harmony. This study aims to move beyond a mere cataloging of garments to interpret their social implications within the broader narrative of the Ajanta artistic tradition.

Methodology

This research will primarily employ a qualitative visual analysis of selected Ajanta murals. Selection of representative paintings Key Jataka tales and secular scenes from various caves will be chosen for indepth analysis. Priority will be given to scenes depicting a wide array of characters from different social strata. Categorization of figures within the selected paintings will be categorized based on their apparent social roles (e.g., royalty, nobility, attendants, dancers, musicians, commoners, mendicants, monks,

servants).Detailed observation of dress code for each category, meticulous observations will be made regarding. Garment of types Dhوتي, sari, antariya (lower garment), uttariya (upper garment/shawl), tuniclike garments, turbans, head coverings. Fabric quality inferred from the drape, translucency, and perceived richness (e.g., silk, fine cotton, coarse cloth).Ornamentation presence and type of jewelry (necklaces, earrings, armlets, anklets, waistbands, crowns), embroidery, patterns on fabric. Hairstyles and headwear elaborate updos, simple braids, turbans, crowns, floral adornments. Body posture and gestures, how dress interacts with body language to convey status or emotion. Contextual analysis, examining the setting of each scene (palace, street, forest, monastery) and the interactions between characters to understand the social dynamics. Comparative analysis, comparing the dress codes across different social categories within the same painting, and across different paintings, to identify patterns and variations. Correlation with Historical records, where possible, findings from the visual analysis will be correlated with available historical texts or archaeological evidence pertaining to dress and social structure in ancient India. Analysis of dress code and community harmony in Ajanta paintings reveal a fascinating interplay of distinct yet often harmoniously presented dress codes.

Discussion

The dress code as a mirror of functional harmony. The analysis of dress code

in Ajanta paintings strongly suggests a representation of functional community harmony. While strict social hierarchies were evident and visually reinforced through clothing, the murals do not depict a society rife with class conflict or disharmony based on attire. Instead, they present a picture where different social groups, with their distinct dress codes, coexist and interact within a structured, yet generally peaceful, framework.

The Ajanta Caves and Their Context

The Ajanta Caves are a series of approximately 30 rockcut Buddhist cave monuments located in the Aurangabad district of Maharashtra, India. They span two distinct phases of construction: an earlier Hinayana phase (2nd to 1st centuries BCE) and a later Mahayana phase (5th to 6th centuries CE), primarily under the patronage of the Vakataka dynasty, especially during the reign of Emperor Harisena. These caves served as monastic retreats (viharas) and prayer halls (chaityas), housing Buddhist monks and providing spaces for worship, study, and meditation (Wikipedia, 2024).

The murals within the Ajanta Caves primarily narrate stories from the Jataka tales – the previous lives of the Buddha – alongside depictions of courtly life, daily activities, flora, and fauna. These paintings are renowned for their vibrant colors, dynamic compositions, and the expressive quality of their figures. They offer a unique window into the material culture of ancient India, including architecture, jewelry, hairstyles, and, crucially for this study, clothing. The

artists, drawing inspiration from their contemporary society, captured a diverse range of individuals and their social interactions (Map Academy, 2025).

The Vakataka period was marked by significant artistic and cultural flourishing, influenced by the broader Gupta Empire. While a hierarchical social structure was prevalent, as in most ancient societies, the Buddhist ethos, which emphasized compassion and a degree of social mobility (at least theoretically), might have influenced the portrayal of social interactions. This research will delve into whether the visual representation of dress in the paintings supports or challenges the notion of a harmonious community, despite inherent social distinctions (Poojn, 2025).

Dress Code and Community Harmony

Dress Code as a Social Indicator, clothing is a nonverbal language that communicates social status, profession, religious affiliation, and even emotional states. In ancient societies, dress often rigidly demarcated social strata. The quality of fabric, complexity of drapery, presence of ornaments, and specific styles could instantly convey a person's position in the hierarchy. Defining Community Harmony, for the purpose of this study, community harmony refers to the peaceful coexistence and functional integration of different social groups within a society. It does not necessarily imply absolute equality, but rather a state where diverse elements, despite their distinctions, contribute to a stable and generally cooperative social fabric.

Visual indicators of harmony in art could include shared spaces and activities. Different social groups depicted together in common settings. Visual Semiotics, this approach involves interpreting signs and symbols within the paintings. Every element, including clothing, contributes to the overall meaning. By systematically observing the "signs" (garments, jewelry, hairstyles) and their "signified" (status, role, identity), we can decode the social messages embedded in the art (Map Academy, 2025)

Distinctions in Royal and Noble Attire

Kings, queens, princes, and high-ranking courtiers are invariably depicted in opulent attire, serving as clear indicators of their elevated status. Rich fabrics, their garments often appear to be made of fine, sheer fabrics like silk, subtly draped to reveal the body contours, suggesting the use of luxurious materials. Royalty and nobility example, women identified as queens or royal ladies are shown with minimal but luxurious costumes and elaborate ornaments. For example, in Cave 17, royal women are depicted with rich jewelry, ornate hairstyles, and dignified expressions, emphasizing their high status and majestic lifestyle. The lady with the mirror and the lady at the swing are specific examples, where their posture and adornment signal their elite position (Map Academy, 2025).

Elaborate ornamentation, they are laden with exquisite jewelry, multistranded pearl necklaces, heavy gold earrings, ornate armlets, bangles, and elaborate waistbands (mekhala) adorned with jewels. Crowns (mukuta) of varying

designs distinguish royal figures. Complex drapery, the way their garments are draped often shows intricate folds and stylistic variations, indicating skilled tailoring and high fashion. Distinct headwear, crowns and elaborate turbans, sometimes adorned with plumes or jewels are specific to royalty and nobility, signifying their authority and prestige. Despite these clear markers of privilege, their presence in scenes often involves interaction with other social strata, rather than isolation. For instance, in scenes depicting courtly life or religious ceremonies, the royal family is shown presiding over or participating alongside attendants, musicians, and devotees, suggesting a communal aspect to public life. Attire of Courtesans, Dancers, and Musicians These figures often display a blend of sensuality and artistry in their dress. Vibrant and expressive, their clothing is typically more revealing, flowing, and vibrant, designed to emphasize movement during performances. They often wear short bodices (choli) or go bare-chested with elaborate jewelry. Decorative motifs, their garments might feature intricate patterns, dyes, and sometimes even block printed or tie-dyed designs (as suggested by recurring patterns). Stylized hairstyles, elaborate coiffures, often adorned with flowers or pearl strings, contribute to their artistic persona. Social role, while distinct from royalty, their graceful integration into court scenes and ceremonial settings underscores their recognized role in the social and cultural fabric, contributing to the court's splendor and entertainment a form of functional harmony. Their

attire, though distinct, complements the overall aesthetic of the scenes, creating a visually harmonious composition. Dancers and musicians example, women portrayed as dancers and musicians are shown in ornate costumes, with detailed jewelry and expressive postures. The famous "dancing girl" of Ajanta, for instance, is adorned in a fabric reminiscent of Pochampalli weaving, emphasizing her role and the cultural importance of performance in courtly life (Map Academy, 2025).

Dress of Commoners, Servants, and Laborers

The attire of the general populace, though less elaborate, is depicted with realistic detail, suggesting their integral role in the community. Simpler garments, men often wear shorter dhotilike lower

garments, sometimes reaching only to the knee (ardhoruka), with the upper torso often bare or covered by a simple cloth. Women might wear a single draped garment or a lower wrap with a simple choli. Minimal ornamentation, jewelry is sparser and less opulent, often limited to simple bangles, anklets, or necklaces of beads. Functionality, the clothing appears practical and suited for daily activities, reflecting their occupations. Integration in scenes, commoners are frequently seen in marketplaces, religious processions, or as attendees in various narratives, interacting with figures from higher strata. While their dress clearly marks their social position, their active participation in community life suggests their valued, albeit subordinate, contribution to the

societal whole. The paintings rarely show overt signs of tension or conflict between these groups based on dress. Attendants and helpers example, female attendants (prasadhika, chatradharini, chamardharini, bhringardharini) are also depicted with attractive attire, sometimes even more elaborate than

the royal ladies. This highlights their important roles in the palace, though their status remains subordinate. Foreign attendants are distinguished by their caps, headscarves, and handkerchiefs, marking their outsider status and different social role (Lal, 2025).

Commoners and others, the attire of less prominent figures is generally simpler, with fewer ornaments. However, even among attendants and musicians, the diversity in clothing—such as the use of stitched and unstitched garments (kurpasak, stananshuk, stanpatta for upper garments, dukul or sari for lower garments, and uttariya as a shawl or dupatta)—reflects the nuanced social stratification (Lal, 2025).

Use of color and material: foreigners in the murals are sometimes identified by the use of distinctive colors (such as lapis lazuli blue for clothing), further signifying social and ethnic differentiation.

Monastic Attire

Buddhist monks and nuns are easily identifiable by their distinctive monastic robes. Simple and unadorned, their

Summary Table: Dress Code and Social Hierarchy in Ajanta Murals and dress codes, with clear distinctions visible in the depiction of clothing,

Social Group	Dress/Ornamentation Features	Example Cave(s)
Royalty/Nobility	Minimal but luxurious clothing, elaborate jewelry, ornate hair	Cave 17, Cave 1
Attendants/Helpers	Attractive, sometimes more elaborate attire than royals, caps	Cave 17, Cave 16
Dancers/Musicians	Ornate costumes, detailed jewelry, expressive postures	Cave 1, Janaka Jataka
Foreigners	Distinctive headgear, colored garments (e.g., lapis lazuli)	Various
Commoners/Others	Simpler clothing, fewer ornaments	Various

garments are typically plain, draped robes (the tricīvara – three robes: antarvāsa, uttarāsaṅga, and saṃghāṭi), usually in ochre or reddishbrown tones, signifying their renunciation of worldly possessions and social status. Uniformity, the uniformity of their dress code visually emphasizes their detachment from social hierarchy and their collective identity within the monastic order. Symbol of shared faith, the presence of monks, often interacting with lay devotees from all walks of life (who offer alms or seek blessings), highlights a spiritual harmony that transcends social distinctions. The act of offering alms, frequently depicted, visually represents a symbiotic relationship between the monastic community and the lay community, fostering a sense of shared purpose and reciprocal support (Map Academy, 2025).

The Ajanta paintings thus serve as a rich visual document of social hierarchy

jewelry, and accessories among different social groups.

Shared Aesthetic

Crucially, the Ajanta paintings, in their portrayal of dress, largely emphasize a sense of order and shared existence rather than conflict. Complementary styles, while hierarchical distinctions are clear through clothing, the different styles often complement each other aesthetically within the compositions, creating a visually harmonious whole. Common motifs, certain decorative motifs or fabric patterns might appear across different social strata, albeit in varying degrees of richness, suggesting shared cultural aesthetics and a sense of collective identity (Sharma, 2020).

Shared human experience, despite differences in attire, the paintings consistently portray universal human emotions and experiences, suggesting a common humanity that underpins

superficial social distinctions. The detailed expressions and postures of all figures, regardless of their dress, convey a shared emotional landscape.

Hierarchy, the paintings clearly delineate social strata through dress, but this delineation serves more to define roles and status within a coherent system than to illustrate deep societal divides or animosity. The king's elaborate crown and the commoner's simple loincloth establish their respective positions, but they are frequently seen coexisting in the same narrative space, participating in shared events.

S y m b o l i s m of interdependence, the depiction of monks receiving alms from various social groups, the presence of dancers and musicians entertaining royalty, and the integration of commoners in public festivities all imply a system of interdependence where each group, with its specific role and attire, contributes to the functioning of the larger community. Idealized portrayal, it is important to acknowledge that the Ajanta paintings, being religious and courtly commissions, likely present an idealized vision of society. The harmony depicted through dress might reflect a desired social order or a cultural aspiration rather than a strictly empirical reality. However, even as an ideal, it speaks to the values and societal aspirations of the patrons and artists.

Cultural cohesion through aesthetics, the consistent artistic style and the shared aesthetic principles evident across the varying costumes suggest a unified cultural identity that transcended social distinctions. The artists' ability to depict diverse attire with a cohesive

visual language reinforces this sense of shared cultural space.

Conclusion

The dress code in the Ajanta Cave paintings offers a compelling, albeit idealized, glimpse into the social dynamics of ancient India. By systematically analyzing the clothing worn by various figures, this research concludes that the murals depict a society characterized by functional community harmony. While distinctions in social status are clearly articulated through the richness, style, and ornamentation of garments, these differences do not translate into visual representations of overt conflict or deep societal schisms. Instead, the paintings emphasize the integration of diverse social groups within shared spaces and activities, showcasing their interdependent roles in maintaining a cohesive community. The consistent portrayal of figures from all strata participating in religious ceremonies, courtly life, and daily routines, each in their characteristic attire, suggests a society that, at least in its idealized artistic representation, valued order, mutual contribution, and a degree of peaceful coexistence. The Ajanta murals, through their sartorial narratives, provide invaluable evidence not only of ancient Indian fashion but also of a societal vision where distinct identities could coalesce into a harmonious whole. Further research could delve into the specific textile patterns, dyeing techniques, and their potential regional origins as depicted in the paintings. A comparative study with other contemporary artistic

traditions in India could also provide broader insights into the representation of social harmony through dress codes across different kingdoms and cultural contexts.



Figure 1 : Visvantara Jataka, Cave 17



Figure 2 : Visvantara Jataka, Cave 17
(Dancers/Musicians)



Figure 3 : Visvantara Jataka, Cave 1
Idignitary



Figure 4 Ajanta Cave 1 ceiling foreign



Figure 5 : Visvantara Jataka, Cave 1



Figure 6 : Visvantara Jataka, Cave 1
(Majanaka king and queen sivali)

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