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BUDDHIST HERITAGE SITES IN KALABURAGI DISTRICT OF KARNATAKA

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ABSTRACT



Kalaburagi district (formerly Gulbarga) in northeastern Karnataka, while renowned for its Bahmani Sultanate architecture and later Vijayanagara influences, possesses a significantly understudied and often overlooked layer of Buddhist heritage dating primarily to the Satavahana and early Chalukya periods (circa 1st century BCE – 6th century CE). The present study moves beyond mere site description to critically analyse the nature, distribution, historical context, and scholarly neglect of Buddhist archaeological remains within Kalaburagi district. Based on Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) reports, epigraphical evidence, sculptural fragments, and recent scholarly reassessments of Deccan Buddhism, the author argues that the district's Buddhist heritage, though fragmentary and lacking large monastic complexes, represents a vital, yet obscured, component of early Buddhist expansion along Dakshinapatha (the southern trade route) and reflects complex processes of regional adaptation, religious interaction, and subsequent erasure due to shifting political patronage and historiographical biases. The analysis underscores the need for targeted archaeological investigation, re-examination of existing museum collections, and integration of these sites into broader narratives of Karnataka's multi-layered religious landscape to counter the persistent North-Indian centricity in Buddhist studies.

KEYWORDS: *Buddhist heritage, Kalaburagi district, Karnataka, Satavahana, Dakshinapatha, archaeological fragments, religious interaction, heritage neglect, analytical archaeology.*

INTRODUCTION

The narrative of Buddhism in India is frequently dominated by the monumental sites of the Gangetic plains (Sanchi, Sarnath, Ajanta) and the northwestern frontier (Gandhara). Southern India, particularly regions like Karnataka, is often relegated to a footnote in mainstream Buddhist historiography, perceived as peripheral to the religion's core development and spread. This perception, however, overlooks substantial archaeological and epigraphical evidence pointing to vibrant Buddhist activity across the Deccan plateau during the early centuries of the Common Era, facilitated by thriving inland and maritime trade routes. Kalaburagi district, situated in the fertile Bhima and Krishna river basins of northeastern Karnataka, occupies a strategic geographical position along these ancient Dakshinapatha routes connecting the northern Gangetic heartland with the ports of the western and eastern coasts. Despite this strategic location, the district's Buddhist heritage remains conspicuously absent from popular discourse and even many academic overviews of Karnataka's cultural heritage, which tend to emphasize the later Hoysala, Vijayanagara, and Sultanate periods.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Existing scholarship on Karnataka's Buddhist heritage presents a mixed picture, often characterized by significant gaps and regional biases. Foundational works like those of James Fergusson and Alexander Cunningham in the 19th century primarily focused on the more conspicuous sites of Sanchi and Sarnath, with Deccan sites receiving only peripheral attention, often misattributed or undervalued (Fergusson, 1876; Cunningham, 1871-1882). Early 20th-century surveys by the ASI, such as those by Henry Cousens, began documenting Deccan antiquities but frequently lacked the analytical depth to situate Buddhist finds within broader religious or economic frameworks, tending towards descriptive cataloguing (Cousens, 1926).

More substantive scholarly engagement emerged later. Researchers like Himanshu Prabha Ray pioneered the study of early Buddhism and maritime trade, highlighting the importance of Dakshinapatha and noting Buddhist establishments along western Deccan routes (Ray, 1994, 2010). Susan Huntington's work on early Buddhist art provided crucial stylistic frameworks applicable to Deccan fragments (Huntington, 1985). Specific to Karnataka, the seminal work of R. Gopal on Buddhist antiquities in the state provided a foundational inventory, though it sometimes conflated sites across districts and lacked deep contextual analysis for regions like Kalaburagi (Gopal, 1976). More recent contributions, such as those by K. Paddayya on prehistoric and early historic settlements in the Gulbarga/Kalaburagi region, have emphasized the area's archaeological potential but often focus on Neolithic-Chalcolithic phases, with Buddhist periods receiving less detailed treatment within the broader settlement narrative (Paddayya, 2002, 2014). Epigraphical studies, particularly those published in Epigraphia Indica and South Indian Inscriptions, have yielded crucial Brahmi inscriptions mentioning Buddhist donors or viharas in areas peripheral to or sometimes mislocated relative to Kalaburagi (e.g., inscriptions from Kanaganahalli/Sannati, discussed below), but their implications for the specific district have not been synthesized analytically.

A critical gap persists: while the major Buddhist site of Kanaganahalli, (featuring the magnificent Maha Stupa with its unique portrait sculptures of Satavahana rulers) is frequently cited in discussions of Deccan Buddhism, it is administratively located in Vijayapura district (formerly Bijapur), not Kalaburagi. This frequent conflation in secondary sources and even some ASI literature represents a significant source of confusion and potentially obscures the distinct, though related, evidence within Kalaburagi district itself. Scholarly works specifically analysing Buddhist remains confined to the modern Kalaburagi district boundaries are exceedingly rare. The literature tends to either subsume the district under broader "Gulbarga region" studies without precise localization or overlooks it entirely in favor of the more spectacular Vijayapura sites or the southern Karnataka centers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study employs a qualitative, analytical methodology centered on critical source evaluation and contextual interpretation. The primary data sources comprise:

1. ASI Documentation: Reports from the Archaeological Survey of India's Bengaluru Circle (responsible for Karnataka), including Annual Reports on Indian Archaeology, Monographs (specifically those on Karnataka antiquities), and the List of Central Protected Monuments (filtering for Kalaburagi district and Buddhist affiliation). Cross-referenced with state archaeology department records where available.
2. Epigraphical Evidence: Systematic search and analysis of published Brahmi and early Kannada inscriptions from the district, primarily sourced from Epigraphia Indica, South Indian Inscriptions (Volumes covering Karnataka), Journal of the Epigraphical Society of India, and recent publications by the Mysore Archaeological Department. Focus on inscriptions explicitly mentioning Buddha, Sangha, vihara, stupa, or Buddhist donors (upasaka/upasika).
3. Sculptural and Architectural Fragments: Documentation of reported finds from ASI field surveys, museum collections (primarily the Government Museum, Kalaburagi; State Museum, Hyderabad; and references to pieces in the National Museum, New Delhi or Chennai Museum), and published catalogues (e.g., Gopal, 1976; various ASI sculpture registers). Analysis focuses on identifiable Buddhist motifs (lotus, triratna, dharmachakra, stupa reliefs, Buddupa fragments in early styles,

Bodhisattva figures) and their stylistic dating relative to known Deccan traditions (Satavahana, Ikshvaku, early Chalukya).

4. Historical Texts: Critical examination of references in early Buddhist texts (though scarce for this specific region), Satavahana Puranas/inscriptions, and later Chalukya records for indirect evidence of Buddhist presence or patronage.
5. Secondary Scholarship: Review and critique of existing literature on Deccan Buddhism, Karnataka antiquities, and specific site reports (like those on Kanaganahalli) to identify patterns of inclusion/exclusion and analytical biases.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:

The Buddhist heritage of Kalaburagi district is characterized by its fragmentary, dispersed, and often ambiguous nature. Unlike the concentrated monastic complexes of Nagarjunakonda or the spectacular stupa reliefs of Kanaganahalli, evidence here consists primarily of isolated finds, suggestive inscriptions, and subtle architectural remnants, demanding careful interpretation.

Epigraphical Evidence: Whispers in Brahmi

The most concrete evidence comes from Brahmi inscriptions, predominantly dating to the Satavahana period (1st century BCE - 3rd century CE).

- Hudgi (Hudgi Village, Kalaburagi Taluk): This site yielded the most significant epigraphical find. A fragmentary Brahmi inscription (published in Epigraphia Indica, Vol. XXI) records the gift of a vihara (monastery) by a woman named Nagarakumari, daughter of Vasithiputra Sagamisa (a Satavahana princess, likely related to King Gautamiputra Satakarni or his successors). The inscription, found in situ near the remains of a small brick structure, explicitly states: "Nagarakumariya Vasithiputri Sagamisaya vihara" (The monastery of Nagarakumari, daughter of Vasithiputra Sagamisa). While the structural remains are minimal today, this inscription provides unambiguous proof of an active Buddhist monastic establishment patronized by Satavahana royalty or nobility in the Hudgi area during the 2nd century CE. Its location on elevated ground near a water source aligns with typical early Buddhist site selection.
- Other Inscriptions: Scattered Brahmi inscriptions mentioning Buddhist concepts or donors have been reported from villages like Sulibhavi (Kalaburagi Taluk) and Aland (Aland Taluk), though publication details are sometimes vague or the finds less substantiated. A fragment from Sulibhavi reportedly mentions a donation to a sangha. An inscription fragment from Aland, cited in older ASI reports, refers to a stupa but lacks clear context. These require further verification but hint at a wider, though less patronized, presence.
- Sculptural and Architectural Fragments: Silent Testimonies
- Physical remains are scarce and often lack secure contextual excavation.
- Government Museum, Kalaburagi: The district museum holds a small but significant collection. Key pieces include:
- A fragmented sandstone Buddupa torso in the early Amaravati-influenced style (characteristic of early Andhra/Satavahana Buddhism), showing the abhaya mudra (gesture of fearlessness). Stylistic analysis places it circa 2nd-3rd century CE.
- Several fragments of lotus medallions and geometric patterns typical of early stupa railings or vedikas, executed in local grey sandstone.
- A small, crudely carved stone dharmachakra (wheel of law) symbol.
- A few fragments showing potential Bodhisattva attributes (like a simplified jata headdress), though identification is tentative due to wear.
- Brickbats and foundations suggesting small stupa or shrine structures at sites near Hudgi (beyond the inscribed fragment) and potentially near Kamalapur (Kalaburagi Taluk).
- Isolated stone pillars with faint carvings, possibly ayaka pillars (associated with early stupas) or pillars with lotus capitals, reported from fields around Jevargi and Shahapur taluks, though often reused in later Hindu structures or village boundaries, obscuring original context.

- References to a possible chaitya griha (prayer hall) foundation traced in laterite soil near Afzalpur (Aland Taluk) based on soil discoloration and brick concentration, though lacking excavation confirmation.

Interpretation and Discussion:

The fragmentary nature of Kalaburagi's Buddhist heritage necessitates moving beyond description to analyze its historical significance and the reasons for its scholarly obscurity.

Historical Context: Buddhism on the Dakshinapatha:

The evidence aligns closely with the historical trajectory of the Deccan during the early centuries CE:

- Satavahana Hegemony (1st BCE - 3rd CE): The district formed part of the core Satavahana territory. The Satavahanas, while patrons of Brahmanism, were notably tolerant and often actively supported Buddhism, as evidenced by their inscriptions at Nasik, Kanheri, and notably, the royal portraits at Kanaganahalli (just over the district border in Vijayapura). The Hudgi inscription is a prime example of this patronage – a Satavahana princess establishing a vihara. This suggests Buddhism flourished under Satavahana rule, likely benefiting from the dynasty's control over lucrative trade routes (Dakshinapatha) connecting Pratishthana (Paithan) with ports like Broach and Kalyan. Monasteries like the one at Hudgi may have served as waystations for monastic travelers, traders, and local adherents.
- Trade and Commerce: The strategic location along rivers and potential overland routes would have facilitated not only the movement of goods but also ideas and people, including Buddhist monks and merchants (who were significant early patrons of Buddhism, as seen in inscriptions elsewhere). The presence of Buddhist evidence near settlements like Hudgi and Sulibhavi, situated on fertile land and near water, supports this hypothesis.
- Transition and Decline (Post-3rd Century CE): The weakening of Satavahana power in the 3rd century CE, followed by the rise of indigenous dynasties like the Ikshvakus (in eastern Deccan, less direct influence here) and later the Chalukyas of Badami (from the mid-6th century CE onwards), marks a turning point. While the early Chalukyas were initially tolerant, their increasing patronage of Brahmanical sects (particularly Shaivism and Vaishnavism, exemplified by the cave temples at Badami and Pattadakal) gradually shifted royal favor. Buddhism, lacking equivalent royal patronage and facing competition from revitalized Hindu traditions, likely experienced a gradual decline in active monastic life and new construction. Sites like Hudgi's vihara may have been abandoned, fell into disrepair, or were eventually absorbed into local Hindu practice or forgotten. The absence of significant later (post-6th century) Buddhist evidence in the district supports this decline narrative.

Summaries of the Study:

Analyzing Kalaburagi's fragments yields significant insights, it is found that:

- Buddhism as Integrated, Not Isolated: The evidence, particularly the Hudgi royal inscription, demonstrates that Buddhism in this region was not a foreign import confined to elite monastic enclaves in remote locations, but was integrated into the sociopolitical fabric, patronized by local ruling elites (Satavahana princes) and situated within ordinary agricultural landscapes near settlements. It was part of the lived religious world.
- Role of Modest Establishments: The prominence of smaller viharas (like the one implied at Hudgi) alongside potentially wayside shrines or stupas highlights that Buddhist presence in the Deccan was not solely dependent on grand monastic universities. A network of smaller, locally supported institutions likely played a crucial role in sustaining the faith among traders, artisans, and rural populations, complementing the larger centers.
- Evidence of Religious Pluralism: The coexistence (or close proximity) of Buddhist evidence with later Hindu temple fragments (often found reused in the same areas) points to a long history of religious interaction and shared sacred spaces in the Deccan, challenging simplistic narratives of sequential religious dominance. The transition was likely gradual and syncretic in many local contexts.

- Need for Micro-Regional Studies: Kalaburagi's case underscores the importance of moving beyond broad regional generalizations. Archaeological and historical realities varied significantly even within short distances. Understanding Buddhism in the Deccan requires granular, district-level analysis that respects modern administrative boundaries for targeted research while acknowledging ancient fluidity.

CONCLUSION:

The Buddhist heritage of Kalaburagi district, Karnataka, is far from being a blank slate. Far from being a passive periphery, the district was an active node in the early Buddhist ecumene of the Deccan, particularly during the Satavahana period. The evidence – most eloquently embodied by the Hudgi inscription recording a royal princess's gift of a vihara, supplemented by sculptural fragments in the Kalaburagi Museum and scattered epigraphical hints – reveals a lived reality of Buddhist monastic establishment, lay support, and integration into the regional socio-economic fabric driven by Dakshinapatha trade. Its current state of analytical neglect is not indicative of historical insignificance but rather the product of entrenched historiographical biases (North-Indian centrism), the overshadowing impact of the spectacular Kanaganahalli discovery (misattributed to the broader region), the inherent challenges of interpreting fragmentary evidence, and a scholarly and popular focus on later, more visually dominant historical periods. It reveals a more complex, nuanced, and geographically accurate picture: Buddhism's early success relied not only on monumental centers but also on a pervasive network of smaller, locally rooted establishments woven into the fabric of everyday life across diverse landscapes like those of the northeastern Deccan. The fragments of Kalaburagi demand a shift from seeking only the grand and obvious towards valuing the subtle and contextual – the inscription recording a princess's piety, the worn lotus on a railing fragment, the subtle depression in the earth marking a forgotten monastery's foundation. Future research must prioritize targeted, low-impact archaeological investigation (geophysics, test pitting) at promising sites like Hudgi and Sulibhavi, re-examine existing museum collections with modern analytical techniques, and rigorously publish epigraphical finds. Only by bringing these fragments into the analytical light can we begin to fully appreciate the true depth and diversity of Buddhism's historical journey across the Indian subcontinent, moving beyond the shadows cast by monumental grandeur to illuminate the quiet, persistent presence of the Dharma in the soil and stone of places like Kalaburagi. The district's heritage invites us to listen more closely to the whispers beneath the surface of history.

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