Barabar Hills - The Earliest Rock-cut Monuments in India

What is the news?

The Barabar hills in Bihar's Gaya district contain a unique group of man-made rock-cut caves (3rd century BCE) of great historical value and architectural and sculptural significance.

What was the ancient association of kings with Barabar hills?

- **Ashoka** - The caves of Sudama and Visvamitra were created in the 12th regnal year of Asoka, and the Karna Chaupar was made in his 19th regnal year.
- But the Lomas Rishi cave remained unfinished and hence also contains no edict of Asoka.
- However, the ground plan of the Sudama and Lomas Rishi caves are nearly identical, and many scholars consider the latter one to be also excavated during the last 20 years of Asoka's reign.
- **Dasaratha** - In the Nagarjuni hill, Asoka's grandson, Dasaratha (232-224 BCE), had excavated three caves on the occasion of his accession to the throne at Magadha with each one bearing his edict.
- These three caves are known as the Gopika, Vadathi and Vapiya.
- Naaga-arjuni points to the divine White Elephant for *naaga* means an elephant (and also a 'serpent'), and *arjuna* means white colour.

What was the relevance of Ajivikas?

- All the caves of the Barabar and Nagarjuni hills were donated as dwellings to Ajivika ascetics.
- It was an ancient Indian religion that however completely vanished after the 14th century.
- The religion was founded by **Goshala Maskariputta**, who was known to be a contemporary of Mahavira and Gautama Buddha.
- Though nothing is known about the religious practices of the Ajivikas, it is said that these ascetics had worshipped the elephant.

What is the uniqueness of Barabar hills?

- The Barabar Hill Caves are the oldest surviving rock-cut caves in India, since the Mauryan Empire
- It is located in the Makhdumpur, Bihar, India and the name "*baraabar*" means 'on par with one another'.
- These caves are set of seven rock-cut caves carved out from granite.
- The Barabar hilltop is divided into halves and it appears like a pair of elephants that face each other while leaning onto the ground.
- **Lomas Rishi Cave -** Lomas Rishi Cave consists of an elaborately-decorated door (*dwaara-torana)* consisting of a row of elephants that progress towards the 'Stupa' emblems.
- The motif of *makara* (crocodile) has been carved prominently on either end of the torana.
- The architecture used on the entrance door characterizes the form of the Chandrashala or the Chaitya arch.
- The overall shape of the entrance is usually described as like the horseshoe, but more aptly as the *gaja-prista-aakara* (in the shape of an elephant's back).
- The Lomas Rishi cave has no inscription of Ashoka since it is incomplete, most likely because of certain technical problems like the appearance of large cracks in the granite stone.
- The interior of all the caves, including one side of the Lomas Rishi, have been finely polished, a typical feature of Mauryan art.

- **Sudama Cave** - The Sudama cave has a vaulted chamber with a 'Mandapa' within it.
- In the first cave of the series the ceiling of the cave is arched.
- The interior walls of this cave create a mirror effect and the surface of the cave re-echoes sounds to favor the melodies sung by the Ajvika monks who resided.
- **Vishwamitra Cave -** Also called the Viswakarma Cave, it is approachable through the steps of Ashoka.
- The cave consists of two rectangular rooms.
- The inscriptions at the entrance dedicate this segment of the raising to the Ajivikas.
- While the cave was declared sacred by the legendary King, it does not have post-Ashoka inscriptions.
- **Karan Chaupar Cave** - Confining with a single rectangular room with polished walls, the Karan Chaupar cave contains inscriptions of the 3rd Century BCE.

- The inscription, which is located at the entrance to the cave, focuses on the Buddhist practice of retirement (Vassavasa) during the rainy season.
- The scriptures also suggest that this particular segment of the Barabar Caves was reserved for Ajvika monks.

References

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