

Viharas and Chaityas: Meaning, Rituals, Architecture

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Viharas and Viharas Chaityas are two major types of Buddhist rock-cut architecture that played a significant role in the spread and development of Buddhism in ancient India. Viharas served as **monasteries housing monks** for spiritual learning and meditation, while Chaityas were sacred **assembly halls** for congregational worship. These structures were strategically located near trade routes, allowing monks to access food donations from visiting traders. The construction of Viharas and Chaityas saw patronage from wealthy merchants and rulers like Ashoka, who commissioned many such structures. Interiors of Viharas and Chaityas were decorated with exquisite mural paintings conveying religious themes executed with the finesse of lines, expressions and colours.

Viharas

Archaeological evidence shows early viharas were constructed using transient materials like wood and sun-dried bricks—these structures date before the third century BCE, or the Mauryan period.

- **Architectural features of Viharas:** The generic architectural layout plan for Viharas excavated within caves consists of:

- **Cell layout:** Monks used to live in a few cells surrounding the central hall for worship in the rock-cut vihara.
- **Entrance and Verandah:** A pillared verandah and a doorway carved out of rock lead to the square or rectangular hall.
- **Stone beds:** There were **stone beds in the cells or rooms without windows**, formed from the natural rock.
- **Hinayanist viharas:** Majorly found in the Western Ghats, like Ajanta, Ellora, Bedsa, Kondane, Pitalkhora, and Nasik.
 - The highly decorated facades as well as sculptural panels and friezes are the remarkable elements of these viharas.
- **Mahayanists viharas:** Ajanta, Ellora, etc. contain these viharas also.
 - At times, the **Mahayanists transformed the vihara**, which was exclusively a residential place, into a place of worship, that is, a **chaitya-griha-cum-vihara**.
 - Instead of a stupa, the image of the Buddha carved on the body of the stupa became the object of worship in these viharas.
- **Plan of Maha Vihara: Mahavihara is a monastic complex of several viharas.**
 - Emerging during the Gupta era, mahaviharas could host thousands of monks for spiritual learning.
 - They played a crucial role in **disseminating Buddhist teachings**.
 - They were centres for **scriptural studies, philosophical debates, and intellectual exchange**.
 - With Pala dynasty support, notable Mahaviharas like **Nalanda** reached their peak influence.
 - Notable Mahaviharas were: **Taxila, Vikramashila, Valabhi, Odantapuri and Somapura**.



Chaityas

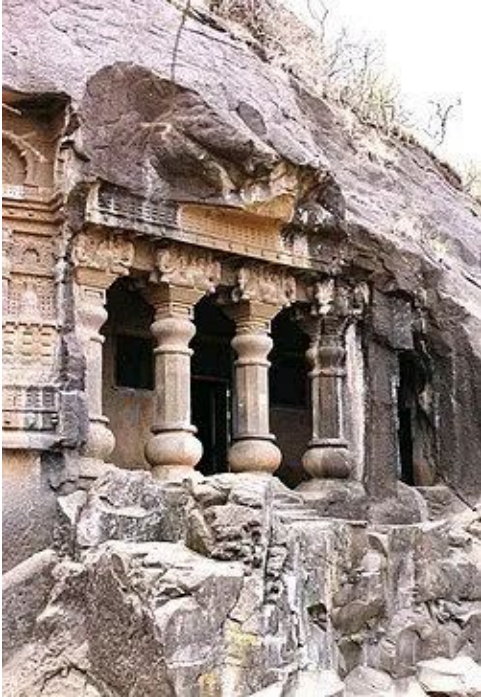
Chaityas were specifically designed as places of worship for Buddhist monks and devotees. Unlike residential Viharas, Chaityas served as sacred assembly halls with religious ceremonies and reverence. The term "chaitya" encompasses various objects deserving of worship, including stupas, Bodhi trees, Buddha images, and Bodhisattva representations.

- **Architectural layout:** The architectural plan for Chaityas is very simple.
 - It typically consists of a single, long hall with a **barrel-vaulted roof** that gives the impression that it is **semi-cylindrical**. Like the back of an **elephant**, its end is **apsidal**.
 - **Stupa placement:** With its rock carving, the stupa was placed in the apse(angle) with ample room for **pradakshina, or circumambulation**.

- **Hinayana Chaityas:** Bhaja, Kondane, Bedsa, Karle, Pitalkhora, Pandulena at Nasik and few caves at Ajanta.
 - Buddha is represented only through symbols in these chaityas. These symbols include the life of Buddha himself, like stupa, Vajrasana, Bodhi Tree, etc.
 - Another group of symbols was called "**tri-ratna**," which stands for the three tenets of the **Buddha: Dharma, Buddha, and Sangha**.
 - The exteriors of Chaitya-grihas depict human and animal forms in addition to partially divine creatures, such as **Yakshis and Yakshas**.
- **Mahayana Chaityas:** Karle and Kanheri in Maharashtra (added Buddha's image), a few caves at Ajanta, Vishwakarma cave at Ellora, the main Hinayanist rock-cut caves are at Bhaja, Kondane, etc.
- The Mahayanist chaityas are extensively adorned with ornamental features and sculptures based upon new mythologies that emerged in the Mahayana literature.



Major Chaityas and Viharas in India

Site	Key Description
Karle Chaitya 	- Period: 160 BCE - 5th CE - Ancient Buddhist rock-cut cave complex near Lonavala, Maharashtra. - It has the largest Chaitya hall, animal and human engravings on pillars and 3 decorated viharas. - Earlier a Hinayanist chaitya, later Buddha's images were added. • Out of 16 excavations, three are Mahayana caves and the remaining are Hinayana.
Nasik Chaitya 	- Period: Satavahana. - A group of 16 viharas and 1 chaitya situated in Nasik, Maharashtra called 'Pandulane'. - It also featured a musical/dance hall.

Junnar Vihara



- An ancient Buddhist cave (**Lenyadri caves**) in Junnar, Maharashtra is known as '**Ganeshleni**'.
- Later converted into the Chaitya-Vihara complex.

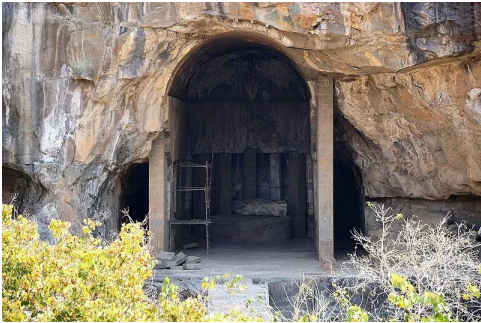
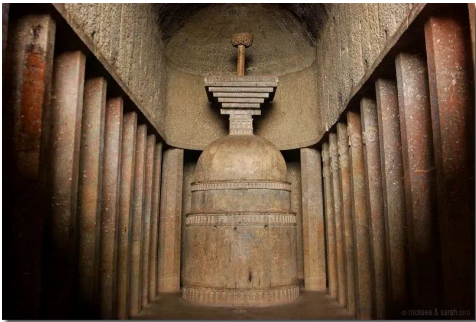
Bhaja Chaitya



- **Period:** 2nd Century BCE
- Buddhist cave network near **Pune** with **22 rock-cut caves** situated along the key trade route.

Konkade Vihara

- The Unique Buddhist monastery in **Colaba, Mumbai**.
- Rare instances of Buddhist structures made **completely of wood rather than stone**.

Pitalkhora Chaitya 	Period: 3rd Century BCE - Site with 14 cave shrines on Satmala Hills constructed by ancient guilds as per inscriptions. Houses chaitya with relics. • Located on a trade route, epigraphs mention merchant funding, and the earliest Chaityas show the transition from wooden posts and lintel architecture to arch-based stone styles.
Bedsa Chaitya 	- Located south of Karle Chaitya, displays the transition from wooden architecture to stone. • Massive 25-foot pillars fronting the main cave.
Kanheri Vihara 	- Extensive cave complex within Sanjay Gandhi National Park near Mumbai with Buddhist carvings & paintings dating from the 1st Century BCE to the 10th Century CE.

Mahaviharas

Site	Key Description
Nalanda Mahavihara 	Period: 3rd-13th CE Located in Bihar, it was a major centre of Buddhist learning and a significant monastery. - Founded by the Kumaragupta, expanded by the Pala dynasty.

Vikramashila Mahavihara 	- Period: 8th-12th CE - Located in Bhagalpur district, Bihar, it was a prominent Buddhist university and monastery. - Founded by Pala King Dharmapala.
Somapura Mahavihara 	- Period: 8th-12th CE - Located in Paharpur, Bangladesh, it was a major Buddhist monastery and centre of learning. - Founded by Pala King Dharmapala.
Odantapuri Mahavihara 	- Period: 7th-12th CE - Located in Bihar, it was a significant Buddhist monastery and seat of learning. - Founded by King Gopala of the Pala dynasty.
Jagaddala Mahavihara 	- Period: 8th-12th CE - Located in Naogaon, Bangladesh, it was a significant Buddhist monastery and seat of learning for the study and dissemination of Tantric Buddhism. - Founded by the Ramapala, Pala dynasty.

Viharas and Chaityas UPSC PYQs

Question 1: Some Buddhist rock-cut caves are called Chaityas, while others are called Viharas. What is the difference between the two? (**UPSC Prelims 2013**)

1. Vihara is a place of worship, while Chaitya is the dwelling place of the monks
2. Chaitya is a place of worship, while Vihara is the dwelling place of the monks
3. Chaitya is the stupa at the far end of the cave, while Vihara is the hall axial to it
4. Vihara is a cave constructed on the bottom of the hill and Chaitya is a cave constructed on top of the hill.

Answer: (b)

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/upsc-exam/viharas-and-chaityas/>

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