

Elephanta Caves

Introduction:

The Island of *Elephanta* (Taluk *Uran*, District *Raigad*), 18°56'20" N and 72°55' 50" E, locally popular as '*Gharapuri*' (puri means fort – a fortress city), is situated about 11Kms northwest of *Apollo Bunder* near Gate Way of India, the departure point for ferries to the famous caves. The Island, which has a coast line of 7 Kms, consists of two hillocks separated by a narrow valley and once full of mangroves, but now on the decline. The rocky outcrop found on the Island is made up of trap, a form of basalt. There are three small hamlets viz. *Raj Bunder*, *Shet Bunder* and *Mora Bunder* located over the Island and still inhabited by people, population roughly being 1250.

The present name of '*Elephanta*' is derived after a colossal statue of Elephant, which once stood at the southern jetty near *Raj bunder* and first discovered by the Portuguese in the 16th century AD. However in the early part of 19th century, the highly disintegrated broken pieces of this monolithic stone elephant were reassembled by a british curator and now can still be seen in the '*veermata jijabai Bhonsle Udyan*', formerly Bombay's Victoria Gardens.

Elephanta Caves were included in the 'World Heritage' list in the year 1987 by the UNESCO due to their outstanding universal value representing a masterpiece of human creative genius and bear a unique and exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition.

Rock-Cut tradition in India:

The development of rock-cut tradition in India dates back to the time of *Mauryans* in the 3rd century BC, as seen at *Barabar* and *Nagarjuni* hills in Bihar. This tradition travelled to major parts of the Indian sub-continent and took a firm root in the Deccan, where almost 1000 of the 1200 rock-cut caves are found and of these, 900 are alone in Maharashtra. These caves were first patronaged by the Buddhists and later continued during the Hindu patrons. While the Buddhist excavations dating from 2nd -1st century BC to 5th -6th century AD are seen at *Bhaja*, *Karla*, *Ajanta*, *Auranghabad*, etc., the caves at *Elephanta*, besides *jogeshwari*, *Mandapeshvar*, *Mahakali*, etc., is an example of culmination of religious activity initiated by the Shaivites, etc., who lived in that age.

Date of the Caves:

Due to lack of historical documents pertaining to *Elephanta*, scholars have varying opinion regarding its dating. It has been assigned variously to *Vakatakas*, who were responsible for the rock excavations at *Ajanta* in the 5th century AD, the *Chalukyas* of *Badami* who ruled from 6th to 8th century AD and even the *Rashtrakutas*, who commissioned the famous *Kailasa* monolith at *Ellora* during 8th century AD, Konkan Mauryas who were a dominant power in the Konkan region in the 6th century AD. According to Walter Spinks, who has made an extensive study of the rock-cut architecture in Maharashtra, is of the opinion that these caves were the work of King *Krishnaraja* of *Kalachuri* dynasty who ruled in the 6th century AD as evident from many hundreds of copper coins found on the Island which are associated with this King. As such the exact date of the caves still remains an enigma.

Elephanta in the later times:

It is popularly believed that different dynasties held their sway over this Island such as the *Mauryas* of *Konkan*, *Trikutakas* of *Badami*, *Silaharas*, *Rashtrakutas*, *Kalyani Chalukyas*, *Yadavas* of *Devagiri* and later by the Muslim rulers of *Ahmadabad*, the *Maratha* and finally by the Portuguese before it passed in to the hands of British.

Architecture:

Although there is lack of evidence with regards to the historical and religious background of the caves, the Cave architecture is well documented.

There are seven rock-cut caves at *Elephanta* hewn out of the hard compact basalt rock. Of these, five are located on the western hill and two on the eastern hill. Besides these caves, there are the remnants of a *Buddhist stupa* dating back to 2nd century BC, on the eastern hill, two cannons of the Portuguese times on the western hill and several water cisterns.

Among the seven caves, cave no.1 is the principle attraction and important, known for its highly evolved *Brahminical* architecture and vibrant plastic art. This cave is approach by a paved entrance on the northern side. The interior is laid out into a colonnaded hall with entrances on the north, west and eastern side with a central hall having six rows of six pillars each. The cave architectural elements can be mainly seen on the columns, brackets, beams, etc. the columns are generally plain cubical with circular and fluted middle part finally topped by a circular cushion capital. Apart from the colonnade hall, the only other architectural feature of interior is the square shrine in one of the bays with a *siva linga* inside, which has plain walls with entrance on four sides. The doorways are flanked by *dvarapalas*.

On the eastern side of the main cave, a flight of steps leads to the larger court and originally this entrance must have served as the approach to the main cave. To the south of this portico is a large cave dedicated to siva. The sanctum is approached by a flight of steps with lion balustrades and has a *linga* inside with a circumambulatory passage around. On the western side of the main cave is a large water cistern excavated into the rock which even today caters to the drinking water needs of the locals.

Sculptures:

The interior of the main cave is relieved with a series of sculptured panels carved into the walls, on either side of the entrances and in three bays. A few of them are damaged and incomplete, but one can still appreciate the stylistic and artistic characteristic.

The central master piece '*sadasiva*' dominates the main cave. Measuring approximately 7m in height, this is acclaimed to be the finest sculpture, carved in full relief, signifying the unification of three different aspects of the supreme beings i.e. the creator, preserver and destroyer. The three faces of the *sadasiva* represent *Tatpurusha* or *Mahadeva* (central full face), *Aghora* or *Bhairava* (left half) and *Vamadeva* or *Uma* (right half). The fourth face which is not visible is said to represent *Sadyojata* or *Nandin*. All the sculptured panels focus around the main figure of *Siva* surround by a smaller consort, celestials and other images. The cosmic dance of *Nataraja* symbolizes the creation and destruction. The *Andhakasura- vadha* panel is a symbolic representation of victory over the ignorance. The *Ardhanarishwara* panel is one of the finest specimens depicting the union of *Parkriti* and *Purusha*. The extraordinary representation of the *Kalyana-sundara murti* panel is the combination of temporal and eternal divinity. The panels of *Gangadhara murti*, *Siva parvati* playing *chauser*, *Ravana* shaking the mount *kailasha* *siva* as *lakulisha* are some of the other outstanding sculptures worthy of notice.

Paintings:

The ceilings of the cave were said to be originally decorated with fresco painting. Now only traces of a fine outline are visible. As per the chronicle of the Portuguese writer, the caves were originally painted with different colors.

The remaining rock-cut caves on the western and eastern hillocks are either partly excavated or damaged due to natural causes.

Stylistically it is opined that the lesser known caves bear resemblance to earliest *saivite* caves at *Jogeshwari* and *Mandapeshwar*.

Conservation:

Elephanta caves, due to their proximity to the sea and having located in heavy rainfall zone, are affected due to weathering action. After its declaration as a protected monument by the British government in the year 1909, there have been continues efforts to preserve these caves. From 1939 onwards and till date various conservation measures such as gunniting the roof of cave No.1, pressure grouting to cap the sub-soil strains, repairs to the rock-cut pillars, etc., have been carried out.