

# THE ELEPHANTA EXPRESS

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7 Pages

## THE MAGIC IN ROCKS

### THE WONDER THAT ELEPHANTA IS

The Elephanta Caves are the wondrous rock structures located in Gharapuri or the picturesque Elephanta Island, in Mumbai's harbor. This unique group of caves is recognized as a World Heritage site by UNESCO and is presently under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India.

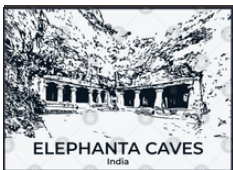
These caves are present in two groups. The first group represents religious dedication to Shiva, whereas the remaining few are caves of Buddhist affiliation.

The caves range between c. 5th to 8th centuries AD but there is debate over the exact time period of their establishment.

There is some evidence of these caves being painted, except that paint has disappeared due to wear and tear caused by passing time, climatic changes and vandalism. The current name "Elephanta" comes from the Portuguese word "Elefante". The Portuguese invaders found a monolithic statue of an elephant at the entrance to the caves and named the island after the elephant.



Mentioned above is the sculpture of Shiva from the First Cave, which is arguably the most important. Referred to as the Sadashiva or the Trimurti, the sculpture represents the three aspects of Shiva - The Creator, The Nurturer and the Destroyer, encompassing the three Gods of the Pantheon.



#### **LIGHT AND SOUND SHOW!**

Come and witness the beautiful History of the Elephanta caves through an immersive light and sound show.

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# EDITORIAL

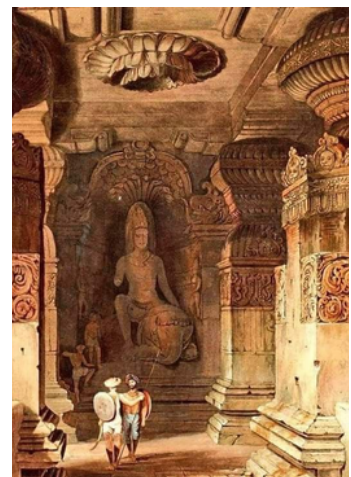
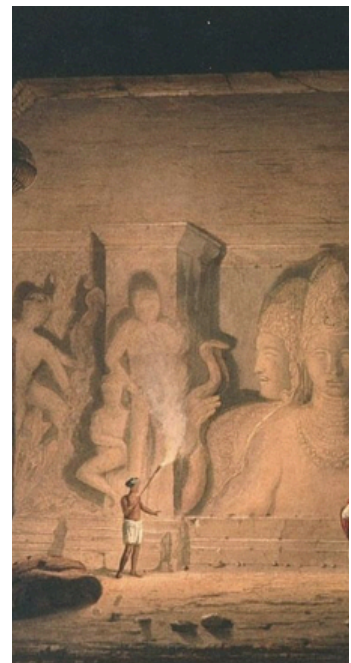
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Scholarship on Elephanta Caves is abundant. However, there is debate amongst scholars with regards to the time period these caves belonged to and under which rulers these came up. Based on archaeological research it can be ascertained that the original residency in Elephanta island was that of the Buddhists. Their influence is evident from the constructions of the Stupas on the Stupa mound as well as Buddhist hints in the Shaivite Caves. However, irrespective of the lack of information to pin point a specific time period and rulership of the Elephanta Caves these caves play an extremely significant role in enabling visitors to understand the cultural and religious affiliations of the Early Indian tradition. It also opens the window to show how historical spaces transform for the usage changing authorities. The case in point being the coming of the Colonial Portuguese who used one of the caves as a church. They often also used these cave spaces for parties and feasts! Contrary to the previous usage of the space as a religious visitation spot. At present time it is extensively visited for tourism and study purpose.

These caves, although lack paintings, consist of extensive rock carvings that depict elaborate scenes from Hindu Mythology. It is a very real possibility that this was built under royal patronage because of its extensive construction and the resources that it would've required. It is speculated that the Chalukyas who were the patrons of the Badami Caves were also Patrons of the Elephanta Caves.

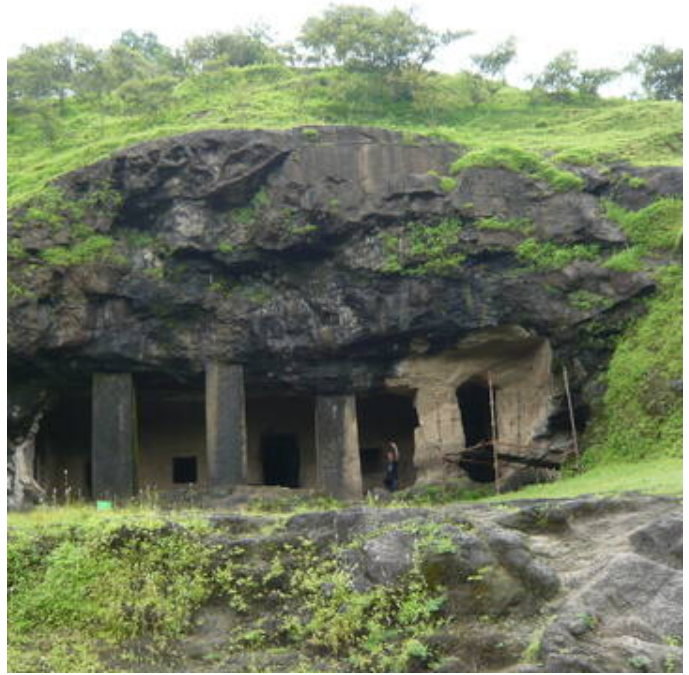


With the coming of the Portuguese these caves came to be known as the Elephanta Caves due to the presence of the Elephant Structure found in front of these caves. Interestingly, this sculpture can now be found in a museum next to the Mumbai Zoo. Thus, with the brilliant material evidence found in the form of these rock carvings the changes in the usage of historical spaces based on changing requirements can be noted. Furthermore, these also serve as spectacular representations of Indian traditional Mythology and handiwork.



# THE ENTRY POINT INTO A WORLD OF ROCK CUT ART

The entry to the Elephanta caves takes place after climbing around 120 steps from the bottom of the hill to the entry point of Elephanta. The first cave, which is also often called the most important one, consists of around 6 columns on each of the three sides. The first Cave at Elephanta resembles the plan of the Dumar Lena Cave at Ellora. Moreover, as aforementioned, it consists of the famous Trimurti which is an example of the artistic brilliance of rock cut art.



## The guards of the Shrine and their dwarf hand rests -

On each side of the Trimurti recess is a pilaster flanked by Dwarapalas or Doorkeepers on its sides. The adjacent image depicts one of the Dwarapalas. The hand of the Dwarapala rests on a Dwarf like figure around 7 feet tall referred to as the Pisacha. This is a dwarf demon in Hindu mythology. The other dwarapala is attended by a Pisacha that is half crouching, has prominent eyes, thick lips and his tongue sticking out of his lips.



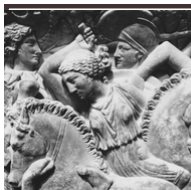
# THE MAIN IDOL

In approaching the Trimurti, one passes by the main shrine or the Garbha which is also flanked by two Dwarapalas resting their hands on the Pisachas. In the middle of the shrine is the vedi or a platform over which is the central idol of the Cave, to which all else is subsidiary - the Linga. The circle that it is fixed in is referred to as the yoni. The linga is representative of Shiva's male power and the Yoni is representative of his female energy. Together, this shrine represents the generative power of nature.



## The Arddhanari - Shiva as half man, half woman

The second most striking rock cut sculpture in the Main cave is the Arddhanari following the Trimurti. As the name suggests, Arddhanari translates to half woman. This is a form of Shiva which appears as half man on one side and half woman on the other split in the middle. It is believed that this structure depicts both Shiva and his consort Parvati together pointing to the fact that male and female energies go hand in hand. Parvati represents the Goddess, Shakti. This depicts a central feature of Shaivism where primacy is given to spiritual devotion that transcends all boundaries including that of Gender. The rest of the sculpture consists of other figures like Indra, Brahma, Vishnu and Garuda amongst others.



### FUN FACT!!

European visitors often mistook the Arddhanari for the Greek Amazon women as they were more often than not, ignorant of Hindu Mythology and Indian traditions.

# Depictions of Shiva and Parvati across Elephanta :

## Shiva as Gangadhara -

To the West of the Trimurti, the compartment consists of the figures of Shiva and Parvati, also referred to as Uma, or Shakti. The headdress of Shiva consists of a Cup from which, the three faced Goddess appears. These three faces are said to be that of the Ganga, Saraswati and Yamuna. This scene points to the part of Hindu mythology where the flow of the Ganga was so heavy for the Earth that it would've caused much destruction. To ensure a steady flow of the same, Shiva used his head as a passage to lineate the flow of water.



### DID YOU KNOW?

Parvati was the reincarnation of Sati, Shiva's first wife and the daughter of the Himalayas.

## Wedding bells in the Rock Cave -

The fourth compartment represents the marriage of Siva and Parvati, in which she stands at his right hand, a position which the wife rarely occupies except on the day of her marriage. Shiva wears the usual high mukuta or cap corrugated above, and which has behind it a sort of oval disc. Parvati wears heavy jewellery and has her hair falling down. Their wedding was a pivotal moment in Hindu Mythology and is thus depicted so elaborately. In compartment 5, another sculpture of Shiva and Parvati represents the scene of the birth of their first child, Kartikeya.



### GUESS WHO?

Various figures associated to Shiva and the Shaivite tradition are also depicted in the Elephanta caves. Find out the name and relation of this figure with Shiva-



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# TRACES OF THE BUDDHA AT ELEPHANTA

Amongst the several forms and figures of Shiva found all over the Elephanta caves is the figure of Shiva as the Mahayogi or the Great Ascetic. Not only in the position given to the ascetic does this figure resemble that of the Buddha, but many of the minor accessories appear as disguised copies of those worn by the Buddha. The figure of Shiva is seated cross-legged on a padmasana or lotus seat, and the palms of his hands are seen rested in his lap, between the upturned soles of the feet, as in most images of Buddha and the Jaina Tirthankaras. Thus, this is testimony of Buddhist influence in the Shaivite caves.



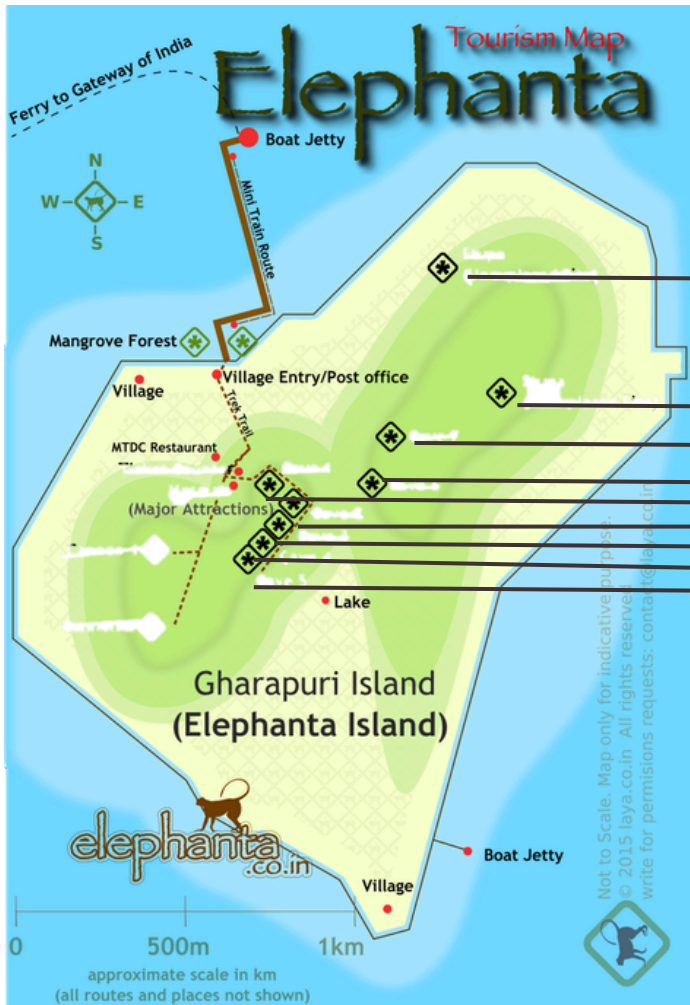
Outside of the indirect references however, scholars argue that the Elephanta island was primarily inhabited by the Buddhists. This can be seen in Cave 6 and 7, found on the other hill also referred to as the Stupa Hill. There are also remains of a stupa that is a Buddhist mound and water tanks. One is a large hall called Cave 6, or Sitabai's temple cave which has three rooms at the back. The central room was a shrine, and the others were for monks or priests. Cave 7 has large artificial boulders and several Buddhist water tanks along its banks. Near the tanks is a mound which was identified as the remains of a Buddhist stupa which can be dated as far back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE .



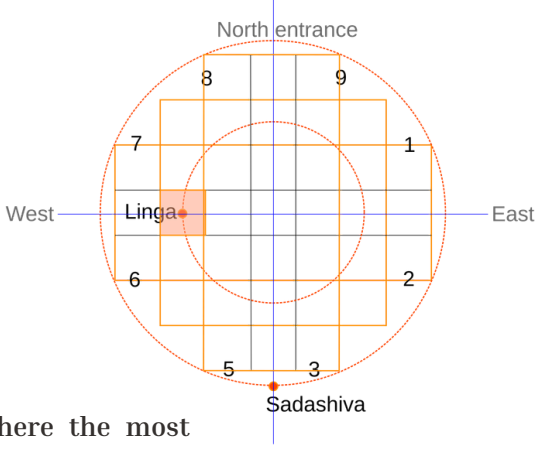
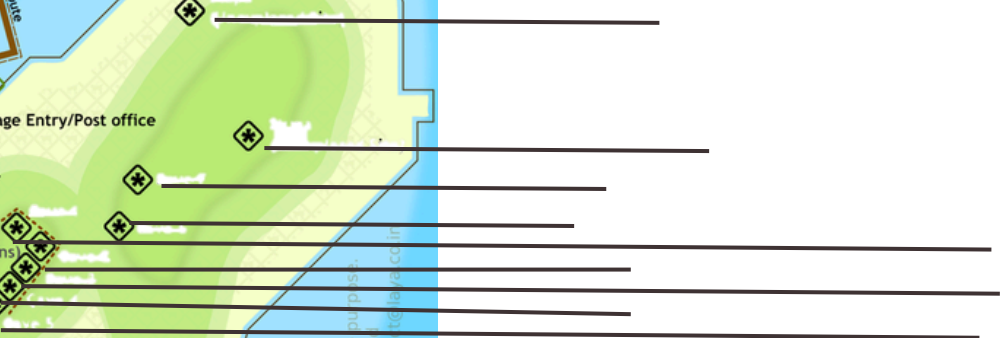
## **CARTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP!**

Learn how to trace the map plans of the Elephanta caves in an exclusive cartography workshop

# ACTIVITY TIME!



Identify the two hills where Elephanta caves are located in the map and write the names of the marked points. These include the 7 caves and 2 stupas.



The Main Elephanta Cave follows the Mandala layout of construction where the most important part of the shrine is at the center of geometric cosmic circles. (view image for reference) . Find out more about this and draw a Mandala map of your house/school, placing the most important room according to you in the center.



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