



## [Glory of Bharath](#) » Bharath Darshan

Dear Sai Brothers and Sisters,

Our journey this month is to one of the marvels of this country - Elephanta Caves listed among UNESCO's World Heritage Sites in India.

### Elephanta Caves



The Elephanta Caves, taluka Uran, district Raigad is located on island hills about 11 km north-east of the Apollo Bandar, Mumbai and 7 km from the shore of the mainland, approximately covering an area of 7 km in circumference. The island is named after a colossal elephant found in the island, which is popularly known as 'Gharapuri'. At present, the statue of elephant is housed at Jijamata Garden in Mumbai. In ancient period, the place is variously identified as Puri which is mentioned in the Aihole inscription of Pulakesin II. It seems, different dynasties held their sway over this island, namely, the Konkan-Mauryas, Trikutakas, Chalukyas of Badami, Silaharas, Rashtrakutas, Kalyani Chalukyas, Yadavas of Deogiri, Muslim rulers of Ahmedabad and then by the Portuguese. The Marathas also had this island under their control and from them it passed into the control of the British.

There are seven cave excavations in the Elephanta group and these are datable from circa 6<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. Among the cave excavations, the Cave 1 is the most impressive which represents the evolved Brahmanical rock-cut architecture. The cave is also famous for the exquisite and vibrant sculptures. On plan it almost resembles the Dumar Lena (Cave 29) of Ellora. The cave has a main entrance on the north with two other openings on the east and west respectively and a central hall with six rows of pillared columns, six in each row except on the western corner, where a shrine of lingam is provided.

On plan, there are three large square recesses divided off by pilasters each of them bearing a gigantic image of a dvarapala. The panel on the east has a figure of ardhnanarishvara, a form of Siva with the combined energies of male and female; and on the west figures of Siva and Parvati playing chausar is carved. The central recess holds the most famous and remarkable sculpture of this period known as the Mahesa-murti. It is a colossal bust of the three forms of Siva, the aghora, turbulent and fearsome; tatpurusha, benign and meditative and vamadeva, mild pleasing and lovable. The other notable panels in the main cave are Andhakasuravada murti; cosmic dance of Nataraja; Kalyanasundara murti; Gangadhara murti; Ravana shaking Kailasa and Siva as Lakulisa. A panel depicting Saptamatrikas near the eastern opening is also remarkable.

### History

Since no inscriptions on any of the caves on the island have been discovered, the ancient history of the island is conjectural, at best. Pandava, the hero of the Hindu epic Mahabharata, and Banasura, the demon devotee of Shiva, are both credited with building temples and cut caves to live. Local tradition holds that the caves are not man-made.

The Elephanta caves are "of unknown date and attribution". Art historians have dated the caves in the range of late 5<sup>th</sup> to late 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Archaeological excavations have unearthed a few Kshatrpa coins dated to 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. The known history is traced only to the defeat of Mauryan rulers of Konkan by the Badami Chalukyas emperor Pulakesi II (609-642) in a naval battle, in 635 AD. Elephanta was then called Puri or Purika, and served as the capital of the Konkan Mauryas. Some historians attribute the caves to the Konkan Mauryas, dating them to the mid 6<sup>th</sup> century, though others refute this claim saying a relatively small kingdom like the Konkan Mauryas could not undertake "an almost superhuman excavation effort," which was needed to carve the rock temples from solid rock and could not have the skilled labor to produce such "high quality" sculpture.

Some other historians attribute the construction to the Kalacuris (late 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century), who may have had a feudal relationship with the Konkan Mauryas. In an era where polytheism was prevalent, the Elephanta main cave dedicates the monotheism of the Pashupata Shaivism sect, a sect to which Kalacuris as well as

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Konkan Mauryas belonged. The Chalukyas, who defeated the Kalachuris as well as the Konkan Mauryas, are also believed by some to be creators of the main cave, in the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Rashtrakutas are the last claimants to the creation of the main cave, approximated to the early 7<sup>th</sup> to late 8<sup>th</sup> century. The Elephanta Shiva cave resembles in some aspects the 8th century Rashtrakuta rock-temple Kailash at Ellora. The Trimurti of Elephanta showing the three faces of Shiva is akin to the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (Shiva), which was the royal insignia of the Rashtrakutas. The Nataraja and Ardhanarishvara sculptures are also attributed to the Rashtrakutas.



**The Trimurti Statue**

Later, Elephanta was ruled by another Chalukyan dynasty, and then by Gujarat Sultanate, who surrendered it to the Portuguese in 1534. By then, Elephanta was called Gharapuri, which denotes a hill settlement. The name is still used in the local Marathi language. The Portuguese named the island "Elephanta Island" in honour of a huge rock-cut black stone statue of an elephant that was then installed on a mound, a short distance east of Gharapuri village. The elephant now sits in the Jijamata Udyaan zoo in Mumbai.



Portuguese rule saw a decline in the Hindu population on the island and the abandonment of the Shiva cave (main cave) as a regular Hindu place of worship, though worship on Mahashivratri, the festival of Shiva, continued and still does. The Portuguese did considerable damage to the sanctuaries. Portuguese soldiers used the reliefs of Shiva in the main cave for target practice, sparing only the Trimurti sculpture. They also removed an inscription related to the creation of the caves. While some historians solely blame the Portuguese for the destruction of the caves, others also cite water-logging and dripping rainwater as additional damaging factors. The Portuguese left in 1661 as per the marriage treaty of Charles II of England and Catherine of Braganza, daughter of King John IV of Portugal. This marriage shifted possession of the islands to the British Empire, as part of Catherine's dowry to Charles.

The caves were designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987 as per the cultural criteria of UNESCO: the caves "represent a masterpiece of human creative genius" and "bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared".

### **The Caves**

The island has two groups of caves in the rock cut architectural style. The caves are hewn from solid basalt rock. All caves were painted in the past, but only traces remain. The larger group of caves, which consists of five caves on the western hill of the island, is well known for its Hindu sculptures. The primary cave numbered as Cave 1, is situated about 1 mile (1.6 km) up a hillside, facing the ocean. It is a rock cut temple complex that covers an area of 60,000 square feet (5,600 m<sup>2</sup>), and consists of a main chamber, two lateral chambers, courtyards, and subsidiary shrines. It is 39 metres (128 ft) deep from the front entrance to the back. The temple complex is the abode of Shiva, depicted in widely celebrated carvings which reveal his several forms and acts. On the eastern part of the island, on the Stupa Hill, there is small group of caves that house Buddhist monuments. This hill named after the religious Stupa monument that they display. One of the two caves is incomplete, while the other contains a Stupa made in brick.

### **Main cave**

The main cave, also called the Shiva cave, Cave 1, or the Great Cave, is 27 metres (89 ft) square in plan with a hall (mandapa). At the entrance are four doors, with three open porticoes and an aisle at the back. Pillars, six in each row, divide the hall into a series of smaller chambers. The roof of the hall has concealed beams supported by stone columns joined together by capitals. The cave entrance is aligned with the north-south axis, unusual for a Shiva shrine (normally east-west). The northern entrance to the cave, which has

1,000 steep steps, is flanked by two panels of Shiva dated to the Gupta period. The left panel depicts Yogishvara (The Lord of Yoga) and the right shows Nataraja (Shiva as the Lord of Dance). The central Shiva shrine is a free-standing square cell with four entrances, located in the right section of the main hall. Smaller shrines are located at the east and west ends of the caves. The eastern sanctuary serves as a ceremonial entrance.

Each wall has large carvings of Shiva, each more than 5 metres (16 ft) in height. The central Shiva relief Trimurti is located on the south wall and is flanked by Ardhanarisvara (a half-man, half-woman representation of Shiva) on its left and Gangadhara to its right, which denotes river Ganges's descent from Shiva's matted locks. Other carvings related to the legend of Shiva are also seen in the main hall at strategic locations in exclusive cubicles; these include Kalyanasundaramurti, depicting Shiva's marriage to the goddess Parvati, Andhakasuravadamurti or Andhakasuramardana, the slaying of the demon Andhaka by Shiva, Shiva-Parvati on Mount Kailash (the abode of Shiva), and Ravananugraha, depicting the demon-king Ravana shaking Kailash. The main cave blends Chalukyan architectural features such as massive figures of the divinities, guardians, and square pillars with custom capitals with Gupta artistic characteristics, like the depiction of mountains and clouds and female hairstyles.



**Shiva and Parvati on Mount Kailasha      Ravana shaking Mount Kailash**

The carving on the south wall to the east of the portico depicts Shiva and Parvati seated on their abode Mount Kailash. The four-armed Shiva is seen with a crown and a disc behind it (all damaged), the sacred thread across his chest, and a dressing gown covering up to the knee. Parvati, dressed in her finery with her hair falling to the front, looks away. Behind her at the right is a woman attendant holding the child, identified with her son Kartikeya, the war-god. Many male and female attendants are seen behind the main figures. Shiva's attendant, the skeleton-like Bhiringi is seated at his feet. Other figures, not distinct, depict, among others, a royal-looking tall person, ascetics, a fat figure, a dwarf, a bull (the mount of Shiva), features of a Garuda, and two monkeys. The scenic beauty of the mountain is sculpted with the sky background amidst heavenly beings showering flowers on Shiva-Parvati. This scene is interpreted as a gambling scene, where Parvati is angry as Shiva cheats in a game of dice.

The carved panel facing this one is a two level depiction of Ravana lifting Kailash. The upper scene is Mount Kailash, where Shiva and Parvati are seated. The eight-armed, three-eyed Shiva wears headgear with a crescent and disc behind it. Most of his arms are broken, two of them resting on attendants' heads. The Parvati figure, seated facing Shiva, remains only as a trunk. The panel is flanked by door keepers. Attendants of Shiva are also seen in the relief but mostly in a damaged state. Bhiringi is seated near Shiva's feet and to his left is the elephant-headed son of Shiva, Ganesha. In this ensemble, the ten-headed demon-king Ravana is seen, with only one head left unscathed, and out of his twenty arms, only a few are discernible. Around Ravana are several demons. Numerous figures are seen above Shiva: the god Vishnu, riding his mount Garuda, to his left; a skeleton-figure; and in a recess, Parvati's mount, a tiger is depicted.



Described as a "masterpiece of Gupta-Chalukyan art", the most important sculpture in the caves is the Trimurti, carved in relief at the back of the cave facing the entrance, on the north-south axis. It is also known as Trimurti Sadashiva and Maheshmurti. The image, 20 feet (6.1 m) in height, depicts a three-headed Shiva, representing Panchamukha Shiva. The three heads are said to represent three essential aspects of Shiva - creation, protection, and destruction. The right half-face (west face) shows him as a young person with sensuous lips, embodying life and its vitality. In his hand he holds something an object resembling a rosebud, depicting the promise of life and creativity. This face is closest to that of Brahma, the creator or Uma or Vamadeva, the feminine side of Shiva and creator of joy and beauty. The left half-face (east face) is that of a moustached young man, displaying anger. This is Shiva as the terrifying Aghora or

Bhairava, the one whose anger can engulf the entire world in flames, leaving only ashes behind. This is also known as Rudra-Shiva, the Destroyer. The central face, benign and meditative, resembles the preserver Vishnu. This is Tatpurusha, "master of positive and negative principles of existence and preserver of their harmony" or Shiva as the yogi Yogeshwar in deep meditation praying for the preservation of humanity. The aspects Sadyojata and Ishana (not carved) faces are considered to be at the back and top of the sculpture.



**Ardhanarishvara (center) at Elephanta caves - The sculpture's left is female and the right is male, depicting Shiva and his consort Parvati**

The Gangadhara image to the right of the Trimurti, is an ensemble of divinities assembled around the central figures of Shiva and Parvati, the former bearing river Ganges as she descends from the heaven. The carving is 13 feet (4.0 m) wide and 17.083 feet (5.207 m) high. From the crown, a cup with a triple-headed female figure (with broken arms), representing the three sacred rivers Ganges, Yamuna, and Sarasvati, is depicted. Shiva is sculpted and bedecked with ornaments. The arms hold a coiling serpent whose hood is seen above his left shoulder. Another hand (partly broken) gives the semblance of Shiva hugging Parvati, with a head of matted hair. There is a small snake on the right hand, a tortoise close to the neck, with a bundle is tied to the back.

An ornamented drapery covers his lower torso, below the waist. Parvati is carved to the left of Shiva with a coiffured hair dress, fully bedecked with ornaments and jewellery, also fully draped, with her right hand touching the head of a female attendant who carries Parvati's dress case. The gods Brahma and Indra, with their mystic regalia and mounts, are shown to the right of Shiva; Vishnu riding his mount Garuda, is shown to the left of Parvati. Many other details are defaced but a kneeling figure in the front is inferred to be the king who ordered the image to be carved. There are many divinities and attendant females at the back. The whole settings are under the sky and cloud scenes, with men and women, all dressed, and are shown showering flowers on the deities.

In the chamber to the east of Trimurti, is the four-armed Ardhanarishvara carving. This image, which is 16.75 feet (5.11 m) in height, has a head dress (double-folded) with two pleats draped towards the female head (Parvati) and the right side (Shiva) depicting curled hair and a crescent. The female figure has all the ornamentation (broad armlets and long bracelets, a large ring in the ear, jeweled rings on the fingers) but the right male figure has drooping hair, armlets and wrist-lets. One of his hands rests on Nandi's left horn, Shiva's mount, which is fairly well preserved. The pair of hands at the back is also bejeweled; the right hand of the male holds a serpent, while the left hand of the female holds a mirror. The front left hand is broken but conjectured as holding the robe of the goddess. The central figure is surrounded by divinities.

### **Shiva slaying Andhaka and Wedding of Shiva**



**Shiva slaying Andhaka**

The engraved panel is considered to be a unique sculpture in the north end of the aisle, and shows Bhairava, or Virabhadra, a frightful form of Shiva. In the carved panel Shiva's consort is seen sitting next to him, looking terrified. A female attendant is next to her. His headgear has a ruff on the back, a skull and cobra over the forehead, and the crescent high on the right. His facial expression is of intense anger

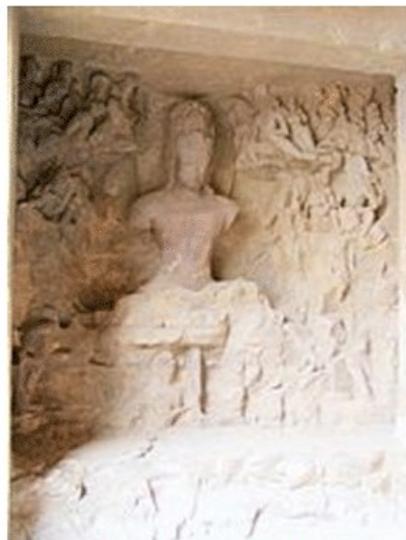
discerned from his furrowed brow, swollen eyes, and tusks. The smaller broken image Andhaka is seen below Bhairava's image. It is interpreted that Shiva is spearing him with the front right hand, as conjectured by the spear seen hanging with out any hold. Also seen is the back hand lifted up and holding an elephant's skin as a cover; the elephant's head, carved tusk, and trunk are seen hanging from the left hand. The second left hand depicts a snake coiled round it. The hand holds a bowl to collect the blood dripping from the slain Andhaka. Furthermore, pieces of a male and two female forms, figures of two ascetics, a small figure in front, a female figure, and two dwarfs are also seen in the carved panel. An unusual sculpture seen above the head of the main figure of Shiva is of a "very wide bottle with a curved groove in the middle of it", which can interpreted variously as: the aum or the linga or a Shiva shrine.



**Panel depicting the divine marriage of Shiva and Parvati with Brahma, Vishnu, Indra, and other divinities in attendance.**

The niche image carved on the south wall is an ensemble of divinities assembled around the central figures of Shiva and Parvati shown getting married. Parvati is seen standing to Shiva's right, the ordained place for a Hindu bride at the wedding. The carvings are damaged substantially; only one of Shiva's four hands is fully seen and the right leg is missing. Shiva has a head dress with a shining disc attached to it. His garments are well-draped, and well-tied at the waist. The sacred thread is seen across his chest. Parvati is carved as a perfect figure with coiffured hair dress, well adorned with jewellery and is draped tightly to display depressions below the waist only. She is seen with a coy expression and is led by her father who has his right hand on her shoulder. Even though both her hands are damaged, it is inferred that her left hand clasped Shiva's right hand as a mark of holy alliance. Brahma is sitting as the officiating priest for the marriage. Vishnu is witness to the marriage. Mena, the mother of Parvati is seen standing next to Vishnu. The moon-god Chandra, seen with a wig and a crescent, is standing behind Parvati holding a circular pot with nectar for the marriage ceremony. Just above the main images, a galaxy of divinities, bearded sages, apsaras (nymphs), Vidyadharas, Yakshis, Gandharvas, Bhringi, and other male and female attendants are seen as witness to the marriage ceremony showering flowers on the divine couple.

### **Yogishvara and Nataraja**



**Shiva as Yogisvara, doing penance**

The panel to the east of the north portico is Shiva in a Yogic position called Yogisvara, Mahayogi, Dharmaraja and Lakulish. Resembling a Buddha, Shiva is in a dilapidated condition with only two broken arms. Shiva is seated in padmasana yogic posture (cross legged) on a lotus carried by two N?gas. His crown is carved with details adorned by a crescent, a round frill at the back, and hair curls dropping on either side of the shoulders. His face is calm in mediation, his eyes half-closed. This represents Shiva in penance sitting amidst the Himalayan mountains after the death of his first wife Sati, who was later reborn as Parvati. He is surrounded by divinities in the sky and attendants below.

The panel carving in the west niche opposite Yogishvara depicts Shiva as Nataraja performing the Tandava (cosmic dance). The niche is 13 feet (4.0 m) wide and 11 feet (3.4 m) in height and set low on the wall. He wears well-decorated headgear. The Shiva image displays a dance pose and had ten arms, but the first right and third left hands are missing. The remaining first right arm is held across the breast and touches the left

side, the second right hand that is seen damaged with an out-flaying pose is broken at the elbow. The third arm is damaged at the elbow, and the fourth is also broken but inferred to have held a Khatvanga (skull-club). The left arms, seen hanging, are damaged near the wrists. The third hand is bent (but broken) towards Parvati standing on the side and the fourth hand is raised up. The right thigh (broken) is lifted up, and the left leg is not seen at all, the elaborate armlets are well-preserved and a skirt round the waist is tied by a ribbon. A tall figurine of Parvati stands to the left of Shiva, which is also seen partly broken but well bejeweled. An airborne female figure is seen behind Parvati. Other figures seen in the relief are: Vishnu riding a Garuda; Indra riding his elephant; the elephant-headed Ganesha; Kartikeya; Bhrngi; sages and attendants.



**Shiva as Nataraja (Cosmic dancer)**

**Main cave shrine**

The central shrine is a free-standing square cell, with entrances on each of its sides. Each door is flanked by two dvarapalas (gate keepers). The Linga, the symbol of Shiva in union with the Yoni, and the symbol of Parvati together symbolize the supreme unity that is deified by the shrine. The Linga is set on a raised platform above the floor of the shrine by 6 feet (1.8 m). Six steps lead to this level from the floor level. The height of the eight dvarapalas varies from 14.833-15.167 feet (4.521-4.623 m).



**Shiva Linga shrine and Dvarapalas at door entry**

**East wing**



**Left: The four-armed doorkeeper and (right) the leogrieff figure**

Several courtyards to the east and west of the main cave are blocked, though there is a 55 feet (17 m)-wide courtyard that is accessible by entering the eastern part and climbing nine steps. A temple on the southern wall of the court depicts a well-preserved fresco. The circular pedestal seen in the courtyard in front of the

Shiva's shrine near the east end, in the open area, is said to be the seat of Nandi, Shiva's mount. On each side of the steps leading to the temple-cave portico is a winged tiger, or leogriff, each seated with a raised forepaw. The portico has chambers at each end and a Linga-shrine at the back. Five low steps and a threshold lead into the central Linga-shrine which is 13.833 feet (4.216 m) wide and 16.0833 feet (4.9022 m) deep and has a circumambulatory path (Pradakshina-path) around it.

At the back of the portico, near the east end, is a gigantic statue of a four-armed doorkeeper with two attendant demons. At the north end is a standing figure holding a trident. His left hand rests on a defaced demon-figure. The west wall depicts the Ashta-Matrikas (eight mother goddesses), flanked by Kartikeya and Ganesha, the sons of Shiva.

### West wing

The west wing, entered through the main cave, is in a semi-ruined state. It has a small chapel and a cistern enclosed within the pillared cave, which is believed to be Buddhist. Another shrine to the west of the courtyard, with a portico, has carvings of Shiva in a yogic pose seated on a lotus carried by "two fat, heavy, wiggled figures". This carving also depicts a three-faced bearded Brahma and several other figurines. Entering through the back door of the portico is a cave enshrined with a multifaceted Shiva Linga erected over roughly hewn salunkhs. At the door entrance on both flanks, statues of gatekeepers standing over demons and two fat, poised figures are seen. On the southern side of the door, is an ensemble of a number of statues. Prominent among these is the Shiva carving, which is depicted with six arms and the third eye in the forehead. Though in a partly ruined state, the carving shows Shiva with an ornamented crown fixed with a crescent, seen carrying a cobra in the left hand, a club in another hand, and discerned to be in a dancing pose. Next to this image are a figure under a plantain tree and a Shiva image (Yogishvara) seated on a lotus. Also seen in the panel are a male figure riding a bull with a bell fastened to its neck, a female figure and another carving to left of Shiva, a female figure with a jewel on her forehead with neatly looped head-dress, Indra riding an elephant, Vishnu with four arms, holding a discus in one of his left hands and riding on Garuda flanked by a small flying figure, and a male figure with crescent in his hair.

### Other notable caves



One of the other caves

To the south-east of the Great Cave, is the second excavation which faces east-northeast. It includes a chapel at the north end. The front of this cave is completely destroyed, only fragments of some semi-columns remain. The interior has suffered water damage. The portico is 85 feet (26 m) long and 35 feet (11 m) deep. The chapel is supported by eight eight-cornered columns and two demi-columns and is irregular-shaped. At the back of the portico are three chambers; the central one has an altar and a water channel (pranalika), though the Linga is lost. The shrine door has some traces of sculpture (a boy, a fat figure, alligators on the frieze, and broken animal figures at the head of a door jamb). The door-keepers of the shrine are now in fragments.

A little to the south of the last cave, is another cave in worse condition, with water damage. It is a portico in which each end probably had a chapel or room with pillars in front. Two of them have cells at the back. The central door at the back of the portico leads to a damaged shrine. The shrine door has door-keepers at each side, leaning on dwarfs with flying figures over the head, with door-keepers and demons on the jamb and architrave. The shrine is a 19.833 feet (6.045 m) deep by 18.833 feet (5.740 m) wide plain room with a low altar, holding a Linga. South of this cave is a cavern, which may be used as a cistern.

Above these caves is a tiger sculpture, which was worshipped as the tiger goddess Vaghesheri. This sculpture may be a guardian of the north entrance of Cave 1. A Linga is also found near a small pond at top of the hill. Sculptures depicting a stone with a sun and a moon and a mother sucking a child (now moved) were also found nearby.

Across the top of the ravine from Cave 1 is large hall known as Sitabai's Temple (cave). The portico has four pillars and two pilasters. The hall has 3 chambers at the back, the central one a shrine and the rest for priests (both are plain rooms). The door of the central shrine has pilasters and a frieze, with the threshold having lion figures at the end. The shrine has an altar, a water channel, and hole in the center, in which a statue of Parvati may have been worshipped. A 17th century record states that "this cave [has] a beautiful gate with a porch of exquisitely wrought marble" and two idols, one of goddess Vetāl Chandi and a head being in a large square seat.

Passing along the face of the eastern hill to the north of Sitabai's cave is a small Hindu excavation with a veranda, which was probably to be three cells, but was abandoned following the discovery of a flaw in the rock. Towards the east of hill is a dry pond, with large artificial boulders and Buddhist cisterns along its banks. At the end of the north spur of the main hill is a mound that resembles a Buddhist stupa.

