

Discovering the architectural wonder of Ellora Caves: A pride of India

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Introduction

Ellora caves, situated in Aurangabad district of Maharashtra state, represent the epitome of Indian rock-cut architecture. These caves are invaluable assets of our history situated in the Western Ghat. This hill area is known by different names; Sahyadri in Karnataka, Neelagiri in Tamil nadu, Annaimalai in Kerala, Coramandel in Orissa and Charanadri in Maharashtra. These caves were first excavated by a British Officer John Smith in 1819.

There are a total of 34 caves in this hill out of which 12 are Buddhist temples, 17 Braminical and 5 are Jain temples. These caves were built between 5th Century and 11th century by various dynasties that ruled over this region. The caves are locally known as Verul Leni. UNESCO has declared these caves as one of the World Heritage Sites in the year 1983. Among the total 34 caves, 1 to 12 caves are Buddhist temples and monasteries, 13 to 29 belong to Hindu faith and 30 to 34 caves belong to Jainism.

Key Words:

Charanadri, Kailasanatha, Rameshwara, Teen Tal, Dashavathara, Vishwakarma, Ravan Ki Khai, Indrasabha, Jaganathasabha,

Description of Ellora Caves

Buddhist Caves

Cave 1

Cave 1 is a Buddhist monastery cave having eight small monastic cells, four in the behind and four in the right. There is a portico in front of one of the cells. It may have served as a granary for the larger halls. This monastery is 41 ft 6 inches wide and 42 ft and 3 inches long.

Cave 2

Cave 2 is much more impressive and is dedicated to Lord Buddha, reached through a flight of steps. A large central chamber supported by 12 great square pillars and it is lined with sculptures of seated Buddhas. The pillars are adorned with cushion brackets. The doorway into the sanctuary is flanked by muscular door keepers. Inside the shrine is a stately seated Buddha.

Cave 3

Cave 3 is a Buddhist monastery which is now in dilapidated condition. It is a perfect square measuring around 46 feet on each side. The roof is a height of 11 feet and supported by twelve columns. However, the one of the cells at the right there are two smaller sculptures of Buddha and attendants. Inside the monastery there is a sculpture of Buddha seated on lotus in a chapel.

Cave 4

Cave 4 is in a poor condition. This cave is 35 ft wide and 39 ft deep having the Padmapani sculpture of Buddha on each side. The sculpture is in a preaching style. There are some sculptures in the south.

Cave 5

Cave 5 is known as *Maharwada Cave*. This is a vihara (monastery) and measures 117 feet deep and 59 feet wide. The most striking feature of this monastery is two long and low stone benches placed at the center and stretches throughout its length, flanked by row of pillars on each side. This cave could have been a place of preaching and learning of the Buddhist principles.

Cave 6

Cave 6 is in complete dilapidated condition. This cave is 26 ft wide from North to south and 28 ft wide from East to West. It has three cells to its East and large sculpture of Buddha seated along with his attendants can be seen. Door keepers are sculpted at the entrance.

Cave 7

Cave 7 is a large plain vihara which is about 51 feet wide by 43 feet deep and the roof supported by four columns. In the back wall, five cells are commenced, of which only two at the right end are finished. There are also three unfinished cells in the right end wall, and four in the left.

Cave 8

Cave 8 consists of two rooms and a shrine with a circumambulatory passage. The inner hall is 28 feet by 25, with three cells on the north side, and is cut off by two pillars at each end. The shrine has the usual dwarapalas and their attendants at the door; and inside is the seated Buddha with his attendants, but in this case Padmapani has four arms, holding the lotus and deer skin over his shoulders. At his feet are small figures of devotees and behind them is a tall female figure with a flower in her left hand and dwarfs over her head. The other tall male attendant has a similar companion on his left.

Cave 9

Cave 9 has a well carved facade, which contains a series of seated Buddhas in ornate arches. On the back wall are two pilasters which divide the wall into three compartments. Buddha is seated in the center and in the left is Padmapani with female attendants.

Cave 10

Cave 10 also known as *Viswakarma Cave* is the most famous of all the Buddhist Caves in Ellora. The *Viswakarma Cave* is also locally known as the *Sutar-ka-jhopra* (Carpenter's hut). The local carpenters visit the cave frequently and worship Buddha as Viswakarma, the patron of their craft. This is the only chaitya in these series of caves. This cave is one of the most magnificent caves in Ellora. Through the courtyard, one reaches the shrine of Lord Buddha, a typical chaityagriha. The shrine is 81 feet long 43 feet wide and 34 feet high. The hall is divided into a nave with side aisles by 28 octagonal pillars. At the far end of the cave stands a huge stupa nearly 27 feet in height and 16 feet in diameter. It has simple circular base, hemispherical dome and a square capital. Typical to a Mahayana construction, it has a large frontispiece nearly 17 feet in height attached to it, on which a 11 feet colossal Buddha seated in a preaching pose.

Cave 11

Cave 11 is popularly known as *Dho Tal* or Two Floors. This has a verandah 120 feet in length and 9 feet wide with two cells and a shrine in which is Buddha with Padmapani and Vajrapani as his attendants. A staircase leads to a similar verandah above, with eight square pillars in front, the back wall pierced with five doors. The first door is only the commencement of a cell. The second leads into a shrine with a colossal Buddha, his right hand on his knee and the left in his lap. In front of the throne is a small female figure holding up a water jar and to the right another sitting on a prostrate figure. The other cells too have figures of Buddha and his attendants.

The top floor is reached by a flight of steps on the north. The last floor has three shrines, however, one of them has not commenced. The other two cells have a Buddha image along with Padmapani and Vajrapani.

Cave 12

Cave 12, also known as *Teen Tal* is the largest monastic complex. The complex is in three storey's. A staircase leads to the second storey which is a huge hall. It contains many representations of Buddha. The shrine is adorned by a colossal image of Lord Buddha flanked by Padmapani and Vajrapani.

Brahminical Caves

Cave 13

Cave 13 is to the left of the *Tin Taal*, is a large perfectly plain room. The front has been destroyed by the decay of the rock. It may have been sort of a rest house for visitors.

Cave 14

Cave 14 is known as *Ravan-ki-khai*. This cave has a courtyard and a shrine with pillars. The walls on both sides of the mandapa have the sculptures of Shaiva and Vaishnava images. The south wall is covered with Saiva sculptures. They are

1. Mahishasura Mardhini – A Form of Parvati killing the buffalo demon.
2. Siva and Parvati on a raised platform playing a dice game. Ganapati and another attendant waits behind Siva, and two females and a male behind Parvati, while between, but beyond them, Bhringi looks on at the game.
3. Siva dancing the tandava, or the great dance which he performs over the destruction of the world; three figures with drums are to his right. Bhringi, his skeleton assistant, is behind, and Parvati and two dwarfs – one with a cat face – are on his left. Above are Brahma and Vishnu on this left, Indra on his elephant on his right with Agni on his ram and two others.
4. Ravana, the demon king, proud of his immeasurable strength, got under Kailasa and intended to carry it off. Parvati got alarmed and feeling the place shake, clung to Siva who pressed his foot down to fix Ravana under the hill until he repented of his misdeed. Ravana had ten heads and twenty arms, and often on the top of his cap, an animal's head is represented.
5. Bhairava, the destructive form of Siva, his foot on a large fat dwarf, another at his side, Ganapati behind him holding up with two of his hands, the elephant-hide in which he wraps himself; with other two he holds a spear with which he transfixed Ratnasura; in one a long sword, and in the sixth a bowl to receive the blood of his victim.
6. The pradakshinapatha on this side has a remarkable group. The first portion totally dark consists of three skeletons. Kal, four armed with a scorpion on his breast, Kali the female personification of death, and a third kneeling. There comes Ganapati eating his laddoos, beyond who are the seven divine mothers, four armed and each with a child. On the return of the wall at the back is Siva seated with the axe and his small hand drum (damru).

On the left wall commencing from the front are:

- a) Bhavani or Durga, four armed, with her foot resting on her tiger, holding her trisula or trident in her upper right hand.
- b) Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu, over a mass of lotuses, with figures holding up water jars, and a tortoise among them.
- c) Varaha, the boar incarnation of Vishnu, his foot on Sesha the great serpent, holding up Prithivi, the personification of Earth.
- d) Vishnu, four armed sits in Vaikunta along with his consorts Lakshmi and Sita, and four attendants behind with chauris.
- e) Vishnu and Lakshmi seated on the same couch under an ornamental arch, with attendants behind. Below are seven dwarfs, four of them playing musical instruments.

The front of the shrine has two very large male dvarapalas and a number of other figures. Inside the shrine is an altar against the back wall, and a broken image of Bhavani or Durga, to whom this cave temple was unmistakably dedicated. There are four holes, as if for fire pits on the floor of the hall.

Cave 15

Cave 15 is known as *Dasavatara* Cave and is situated at some distance from Cave 13, and at a higher level. It is two-storeyed monastery and has a large courtyard. On the back wall, there is a famous inscription of Rashtrakuta kings. The cells on the south wall have the sculptures of Shiva and Vishnu. The south wall has the sculpture of Vishnu with his ten forms.

Cave 16



Kailasanatha Temple

Cave 16 is one of the famous temples of Ellora Caves. It is dedicated to Lord Shiva, also known as the *Kailasa* Temple. Its construction is attributed to the Rashtrakuta king Krishna I. It is considered one of the most remarkable cave temples in India because of its size, architecture, and sculptural treatment. The world-famous Kailasanath Temple is a marvelous example of Rashtrakuta architecture. The temple has four parts- the central shrine, the entrance gate, the Nandi shrine, and a group of five shrines surrounding the courtyard. A two-storeyed gateway opens to reveal a U-shaped courtyard. The dimensions of the courtyard are 276 ft x 107 ft at the base. The courtyard is edged by a columned arcade three stories high containing enormous sculptures of different deities. Within the courtyard, there is a central shrine dedicated to Lord Shiva and an image of Nandi (the sacred bull). The central shrine housing the lingam features a flat-roofed mandapa supported by 16 pillars and a Dravidian shikhara. It stands on a high plinth which is carved with sculptures of elephants and lions. The sanctum contains a huge monolithic linga and the ceiling is decorated with an enormous lotus. The temple has many sculptural designs depicting events from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Like all Shiva temples, Nandi sits on a porch in front of the central temple. The Nandi mandapa and main Shiva temple are about 7 m high and built on two storeys. The lower story of the Nandi Mandapa is a solid structure, decorated with elaborate illustrative carvings.

Cave 17

Cave 17 is a Shaiva temple. It is 64 ft wide and 37 ft deep. The shrine door is boldly molded in Dravidian style. The *dwarapalas* are sculpted at the entrance. The panels carved on the side walls are Ganesha sculptures.

Cave 18

Cave 18 is 67 feet deep and 55 feet wide overall. It has four unfinished columns in front, and a deep recess at each end inside. At the back of the hall is a vestibule or ante-chamber to the shrine 30 feet in length with two pillars and corresponding pilasters in front. Some plaster, consisting of mud with vegetable fiber in it, adheres to parts of the walls and pillars of this cave. One of the pillars, the last few letters of a painted inscription in Devanagari is still visible. In the shrine is a round pedestal set on a base, and of a different stone from the cave. In front, in the usual place for Nandi, is a square trough; possibly

an agnikunda or fire-pit.

Cave 19

Descending to a slightly lower level, a little further from cave 18, one can come to the primitive looking Cave 19. Part of the roof had fallen in and has been reconstructed and excavated completely. Earlier rain water used to stand in it but now it has been taken care of. The front pillars have gone and for some distance inside the entrance the cave is not so wide as it is in the middle, where four pillars on each side screen off the recess; in line with the fourth of these are four more in front of the shrine, which contains a broken pedestal and a linga. The dvarapalas of the shrine are of good height with minimum ornamentation and carry maces.

Cave 20

Cave 20 has a small linga shrine, originally with two pillars in front. Outside the facade on the north is Ganapati, and on the south is Mahishasuri. The shrine has a wide circumambulatory round it, and in each entrance to it is a large cell with two square pillars, having octagon necks in front. Inclusive of these chambers, the cave measures 53 feet by 30 overall. The shrine door is carved round with creeper and roll patterns. On each side is a tall dvarapala, with a small female figure between him and the entrance. On the platform outside is a square base, either of the victory pillar or the remains of a pedestal for a Nandi.

Cave 21

Cave 21 is known as *Rameshwara* Cave. A Nandi is placed just in front of the cave over a raised platform. The cave consists of a rectangular mandapa and the sanctum. The mandapa is provided with a dwarf wall which is fully sculpted on the exterior in vertical and horizontal bands. The mandapa is 16 feet in height and measures 69 feet by 251 feet with a shrine at each end, cut off by two cushion capital pillars. The walls of the mandapa and two cells one each on the north and south have massive sculptural representations. The walls of the cell on the south have representations of Saptamatrikas, Nataraja, Kali and Kala on western wall. The walls of the north cell have representations of the marriage of Siva and Parvati.

The entrance doorway of the shrine is very elaborate, divided into different segments, and profusely carved. The entrance is guarded by two dvarapalas, one on each side. The sanctum contains a linga.

Cave 22

Cave 22 is called *Nilkantha* shrine. This is notable for the free standing Nandi shrine. This shrine is 44 ft wide and 12 ft deep. It has four pillars in front and two on each of the other three sides of the hall. On the walls of this hall have sculptures of Ganesha, the three Devis and a four armed Vishnu. There is a pedestal and a highly polished linga in the sanctum. The locals smear blue streaks upon the linga, so the name Nilkantha.

Caves 23- 25

Cave 23 consisting of a partly double verandah with five doors entering into small cells, one of them containing a round pedestal and linga, with a Trimurthi on the back wall. **Cave 24** is a series of five low cells called *Teli-Ka-Gana*, the Oilman's Mill. It contains some small sculptures of no special interest. **Cave 25**, also known as *Kunbharwada*, depicts Surya, the sun god, with his chariot drawn by seven magnificent horses and a female at each side shooting with a bow. This could have been a temple dedicated to the Sun God

Cave 26

Cave 26 has four columns in front and two at the back with pilasters, which are quite of the Elephanta pattern. At each end of the spacious hall has a chapel raised three or four feet above the ground on a moulded base. In front of each pilaster of the Vestibule is a female chauri bearer. There is a large square pedestal and linga in the sanctum.

Cave 27 & 28

Cave 27, also called as *Milkmaid's Cave*, is on the right edge of a ravine that separates it from the Cave 28. This cave has carvings of Lakshmi, Vishnu, Siva, Brahma, Mahishasuramardini, Varaha with Prithvi, and Vishnu in the form of Sesha Sayana, half finished. **Cave 28** is under the cliff over which the stream falls. This waterfall is also called Sita-Ki-Nahani. It has couple of cells, a vestibule and a shrine with dwarapalas at each side of the door.

Cave 29

Cave 29 said to be influenced by the pattern of the Elephanta Caves. This cave is compared with the ones at *Elephanta* and *Garapuri* Caves. It is 149 ft deep and 148 ft wide and 17.8 ft tall. The shrine houses a huge linga entered through four entrances flanked by huge dwarapalas. Two large lions with small elephants under their paws guard the steps which lead to the hall from three sides. The halls are adorned with six huge sculptural panels depicting various episodes connected with Lord Siva. River goddesses are positioned outside the north and south entrance. This cave also has two mysterious sculpted depressions, one on south and other on the north. Various identifications have been proposed, the prominent among them is that they are religious Vedic altars used at specific important religious rituals.

Jain Caves

Cave 30

Cave 30 is a Jain Cave situated just 1.5 KMs away from Kailasanath Temple in Ellora. There are five Jain Caves at Ellora belong to the 9th and 10th centuries AD. They all belong to the Digambara sect. Cave 30 is the first in the series of Jain Caves known as *Chhota Kailasa* as it is an unfinished version of the stupendous Hindu Kailasa Temple. It resembles Dravidian temple architecture. Inside are images of 22 seated Tirthankaras and Mahavira seated on his Lion throne in the shrine. Another interesting sight of the cave is the majestic rock cut elephant.

Cave 31

Cave 31 is a Jain cave and it has a sculpture of Lord Mahaveera in seating position. The outer walls of this shrine have the sculptures of Jain Digambara saints. On one pillar, Lord Mahaveer is seen preaching his disciples.

Cave 32

Cave 32 is actually a series of shrines dedicated to Lord Mahaveera and other Jaina divinities aesthetically arranged in double storeys. It is called *Indra Sabha*. It has two storeys. The ground floor is plain, but the upstairs has intricate carvings. A simple gateway leads into an open court, with its sides adorned with lions, elephant friezes. There is a monolithic shrine of the Tirthankaras in the middle, a huge monolithic pillar known as manastambha is to its right and a colossal monolithic elephant to its left. The manastambha measures 28 feet in height and is crowned by four seated images facing the cardinal directions. The monolithic elephant reminds one of the elephants sculpted in the court of Kailasa, but, here it is more elegant and well preserved. The important sculptures here are Ambika, the mother goddess, with a child seated on her lap, a lion beneath and a spreading tree above. Other panels within the hall show Indra seated on the elephant, Mahavira flanked by guardians of Tirthankaras. The ceiling is richly carved with a massive lotus at the center. Paintings on the ceiling of the upper Mandapa show couples and maidens flying through the clouds.

Cave 33

Cave 33 is also a Jain cave situated just beside the Indra Sabha in Ellora. Known as *Jagannatha Sabha*, it is the second largest in the Jain group of caves at Ellora. The court of the cave is much smaller than the Indra Sabha which contained some well-preserved sculptures. Cave 33 has five independent

shrines, each with a columned mandapa and a sanctuary built on two levels. The hall has two heavy square pillars in front and four in the middle area. The first floor has an auditorium which is 13.10 feet wide and 14.06 ft deep.

Cave 34

Cave 34 is the last in the series of Jain Caves. This cave has a small shrine situated at the extreme northern end which depicts the image of the Tirthankaras. The shrine door is carved with figures of Matanga, the Jain God of prosperity and Sidhaika, the Jain Goddess of generosity on either side. A seated figure of Mahavira is housed in the center of the shrine.

Conclusion:

Ellora caves are a large complex of Jain, Buddhist and Hindu temples. The 16th cave known as Kailasanatha Temple is one of the famous caves and it stands as eloquent testimony for Dravidian style of architecture. Every year, Ajanta-Ellora Utsav held at Aurangabad to showcase the glory of the architectural marvel of our ancestors. Many national and international artists take part in this cultural festival,

The Ellora caves bring the civilization of ancient India to life. The Ellora complex illustrates the spirit of tolerance that was characteristic of ancient India. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the modern technological advance has no answer to this ancient architectural marvel. Besides, it is a matter of pride to say that these marvelous caves were built by Kannadigas.

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