

Iconographic Forms of Siva Murti: Elephanta Caves

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: Elephanta, Gharapuri, Shiva, Kalachuris, Aiduka

Elephanta is one of the pivotal rock caves in Maharashtra. It has Buddhist Stupa and a cave which is dedicated to Hindu God Shiva. Carved during ancient times, the murtis of Shiva are in different forms and each murti has got mythological story to tell. This paper aims at understanding the forms of murtis and stories behind them. The paper attempts to study about iconographic forms of Shiva in previous times viz, Harappan origins, Vedic origins, inscribed on the coins of the rulers. An attempt has been made to understand the striking figure of cave popularly known as *Aiduka*, as the figure is carved in the Andhakasura panel of Shiva. Most importantly the figure is not found anywhere else except Elephanta caves.

INTRODUCTION

The island of Elephanta or Gharapuri, as it is called by Hindus, is about six miles from Mumbai and four miles from the shore of the mainland. It was named Elephanta by the Portuguese from a large stone elephant 13 feet 2 inches in length and about 7 feet 4 inches high that stood near the old landing- place on the south side of the island.

The great cave is in the western hill of the island, and at an elevation of about 250 feet above high- water level. It is hewn out of a hard-compact trap rock, which has also been cut away on either side, leaving open areas affording entrance from its east or west sides. The principal entrance faces the north. ⁱ

The village Gharapuri is still there on the island which is identified with ancient Puri, the capital of the Mauryas of Konkan who ruled here in the sixth and seventh century A.D. Puri appears to be the same as Sripuri which is referred to in the Aihole inscription of the Chalyukan monarch Pulakesin II who ruled in the 1st half of the 7th century A.D.

There are traces of ancient habitation on the island of a very early period as is evident from the remains of a Buddhist Stupa which can be assigned to about 2nd century BC.

Presence of seven rock-cut caves at the site of which the most important is the main cave (no.1) dedicated to Hindu lord Shiva. The main cave is one of the finest monuments of its kind and is full of exquisitely sculptured panels which, though damaged beyond repair, still do not fail to impress the visitor. They testify to the superb skill of the ancient Indian artist.

For visitors the most convenient season for visiting the caves is winter months from November to March. There is a miniature train for going from the pier to the foot of the hill where the caves are located. ⁱⁱ

Historical background of Elephanta: -

There is no precise information on the historical background of Elephanta. The cave-temple has no surviving inscriptions although, there may once have been a dedicatory inscription over the entrance. ⁱⁱⁱ

Diogo de couto, the Portuguese analyst says, “*when the Portuguese took Bacaim and its dependencies they went to this pagoda and removed a famous stone over the entrance that had an inscription of large and well characters, which was sent to the king, after the governor of India had in vain endeavoured to find out any Hindu in the east could decipher them, but without any effect the stone remained there*”. ^{iv}

Dates for the cave-temple have still been placed between mid-sixth and the early ninth centuries. Dating has usually been arrived by relating the Elephanta style to other monuments of major dynasties in the region.

In the absence of direct epigraphical evidence, several authorities, including V.V. Mirashi and W. Spink have recently attempted to assemble relevant information about the immediate area in order to establish the probable sponsors of Elephanta. The general political situation is as follows.^v

Maharashtra was a part of the Mauryan empire as is evident from Ashoka's edict at Sopara (ancient surparaka), which is now a suburb of Mumbai, where there are also the remains of a Buddhist stupa which was originally built by the emperor himself in the third century BC. After the decline of Mauryas, the Satavahanas ruled over the Deccan from about BC 200-AD 200 when all the early Buddhist cave temples of western India were excavated. Later the Vakatakas, who were matrimonially related to the Imperial Guptas of north India, were dominant. The magnificent group of the Mahayana caves at Ajanta were excavated during their reign. They were followed by the Vishnukundins for a time who probably were driven out by the kalachuris of central India who ruled from Mahismati, in the sixth century AD. They were the great devotees of Shiva and were the followers of the Pasupata cult which was founded by Lakulisa who lived at Kayavarohana (present day Karwan, Gujarat)^{vi}

The Kalachuris have been proposed by Mirashi as the most likely patrons of Elephanta. The reliefs in the cave-temple are similar ones at Badami indicates a date of ca. 550-600 for Elephanta. The factors which supports this theory are-

- a. Kalachuris were the fervent devotees of Maheshvara and were members of the Pasupata sect of savisim, as evidenced by their land grants. Their second ruler, krishnaraja, described on the coins as being a '*Paramamahesvara*' (devotee of Shiva, and in an inscription of his son as being devoted to Pasupati (Shiva) from birth. Some of his coins imitate the Bull-type silver issues of skandagupta of the northern Gupta dynasty. His rule extended to Gujarat and over the Konkan and Maharashtra. The earliest coins found at the site of Ellora is one of the Krishnaraja, from in front of the Ramesvara cave (cave 21)
- b. Recently some 31 copper coins of krishnaraja were found on Elephanta Island. The palaeography on six of the coins which were in good condition is similar to the Brahmi inscriptions on his silver issues. This supports to the idea that krishnaraja was the patron of the main cave.
- c. Kalachuris were the only family ruling in this area during 6th and 7th centuries.
- d. The figure of Lakulisa, founder of the sect, is found at the north and recess outside the shrine in the west court of Elephanta and the kalachuris were the only family ruling in this area during sixth and seventh centuries with sufficient resources to support such a grand undertaking^{vii}

Iconographic forms of Shiva since previous times: -

Though elephanta has marvelous murtis of shiva , it is important to know iconographic forms of shiva murtis since ancient times in India.

Shiva (" the auspicious one") also known as Mahadeva ("great god") one of the principal deities of Hinduism. He is the Supreme Being within Saivism, one of the major traditions within contemporary Hinduism.

The Shiva related tradition is a major part of Hinduism, found all over the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Scholars have interpreted early prehistoric paintings at bhimbetka rock shelters carbon dated to be from pre – 10,000 BCE periods, as shiva dancing, Shiva's trident, and his mount Nandi. Rock paintings from bhimbetka rock shelters, depicting a figure with a trishul, have been described as Nat raja by Erwin neumayer, who dates them to the Mesolithic.

Indus valley origins: -

Of several Indus valley seals that show animals, one seal that has attracted attention shows a large central figure, either horned or wearing a horned headdress and possibly ithyphallic, seated in a posture reminiscent of the lotus position, surrounded by animals. This figure was named by early excavators of Mohenjo-Daro as pashupati, an epithet of later Hindu deity Shiva^{viii}

Vedic origins: -

The Vedic literature refers to a minor atmospheric deity, with fearsome powers called Rudra. The Rigveda, for example, has 3 out of 1,028 hymns dedicated to Rudra, and he finds occasional mention in other hymns of the same text. The term Shiva also appears in the Rigveda, but simply as an epithet, that means "kind, auspicious", one of the adjectives used to describe many different Vedic deities. While fierce ruthless natural phenomenon and storm-related Rudra is feared in the hymns of the Rigveda, the beneficial rains he brings are welcomed as Shiva aspect of him. This healing, nurturing, life-enabling aspect emerges in the Vedas as Rudra-Shiva, and in post-Vedic literature ultimately as Shiva who combines the destructive and constructive powers, the terrific and the gentle, as the ultimate recycler and rejuvenator of all existence.^{ix}

Shiva on the coins of kushanas:

The visual appearance of Shiva is based on the iconography of the god Wes, who is frequently depicted on the reverse of kushana coinage from the time of Vima onwards. Wes, as introduced by the kushanas, was the outcome of a syncretism by merging attributes of Greek, roman, native and Iranian deities. Thus, Wes can be considered an intermediary deity who played a critical role in the formation of Hindu Shiva's iconography in gandhara.

The visual manifestations of the kushanas Wes, as depicted on the coins and the stone images of the Hindu Shiva from the same period, share strong resemblances.

Shiva images are depicted on the coins of Vima kadphises, Huvishka's and on Vasudeva's coins.^x

Shiva Murti's in Elephanta / Cave details: -

In this the relief sculptures of the Elephanta will be discussed. Forms of murtis and its puranic stories.

Shiva as Mahayogi or Lakulisa :-

On entering the cave through the northern portico, we see on the left wall of the hall a controversial panel in which god is seated in padmasana, the yogic posture, on a lotus, the stalk of which is held by two naga figures. He wears jatamukuta like that of Shiva which has prominent crest all the front. The face has lost all its relief features, both the arms are broken from the shoulder. The figures on the right are totally destroyed whereas those on the left are mutilated; flying figures are seen above. In the upper right corner one can make out Brahma on swan, Indra on elephant and Vishnu on eagle (garuda).^{xi}

According to Saivites, Shiva is a creator-protector-Destroyer. He sits in deep meditation, as Mahayogi, but when he does so, his guardians of the quarters become worried since his divine presence is required to conduct the affairs of the cosmos. They come and request him protect the world from evil.^{xii}

Ravana Shaking Mt. Kailasha:-

According to the legend, Ravana got under kailasa or the silver mountain that he might carry it off to Lanka, and so have Shiva all to himself and make sure of his aid against Rama. Parvati perceiving the movement, called in fright to Shiva, on which he, raising his foot, pressed down the mount on Ravana's head and fixed him where he was for ten thousand years until his grandfather, Pulastya taught him to propitiate Shiva and became a devoted Saiva. Ravana's back is turned to the spectator and a sword is stuck in his waistband; his faces are entirely obliterated, and only few of his twenty arms are teracable.^{xiii}

Shiva and Parvati: -

Shiva and Parvati are represented in it seated together on a raised floor and both adorned as in the other sculptures. Behind Parvati's right shoulder stands a female figure carrying a child astraddle on her left side; this is probably intended to represent a nurse bearing *Karttikeya* called also *Skanda* and *Mahasena*, the war- god, the son of Shiva, born to destroy the power of Tarak, a gaint demon, who by penance secured such power that he troubled earth, hell and heaven, deprived the gods of their sacrifices, and drove them in pitiable fright to seek the aid of Brahma. Other figures of attendants fill up the rest of the compartment.

The rock over the heads of Shiva and Parvati is carved into patterns somewhat resembling irregular frets disposed on an uneven surface intended to represent the rocks of Kailasa. On clouds on each side are the unusual celestial attendants or Gandharvas and attended by Bhringi, Ganesha and others.^{xiv}

Ardhanarishvara Shiva: -

On the wall to the east of the Trimurti is a damaged four-armed Ardhanarishvara carving 16.8 ft in height. It represents the ancient Hindu concept of essential interdependence of the feminine and the masculine aspects in the universe, for its creation, its sustenance and its destruction. It is represented as half woman shown as half of Parvati in this Elephanta panel on the right side, with breast, waist, feminine hair and items such as a mirror in the upper hand. The second half-man side is Shiva with male characteristics and items iconographically his symbol. In Saivism, the concept pictorially symbolizes the transcendence of all duality including gender, with the spiritual lacking any distinctions, where energy and power (Shakti, Parvati) is unified and inseparable with the soul and awareness (Brahman, Shiva).

In the panel, the relief shows a headdress (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, jewelled rings on the fingers) but the right male figure has drooping hair, armlets and wristlets. One of his hands rests on Nandi bull's left horn, Shiva's mount, which is fairly well preserved. The pair of hands at the back is also bejewelled; the right hand of the male side holds a serpent, while the left hand of the female side holds a mirror. The front left hand is broken, while a large part of the lower half of the panel was damaged at some point. Around the Ardhanarishwara are three layers of symbolic characters. The lowest or at the same level as the viewer are human figures oriented reverentially towards the androgyne image. Above them are gods and goddesses such as Brahma, Vishnu, Indra and others who are seated on their *vahanas*. Above them are flying *apsaras* approaching the fused divinity with garlands, music, and celebratory offerings.^{xv}

Trimurti /SadaShiva/Mahesha-murti:-

The well-proportioned three- faced bust, occupying this recess, represents Shiva in the form of *Mahesa* or the supreme being. It is 17 feet 10 inches high from above the base which measures 2^{1/2} feet in height. The three faces correspond to the three functions of the god, namely, the creation, the protection and the destruction of the universe. *Trimurti* would be a correct name for this sculpture if the term is taken in the sense of 'triple-form' (tri=three and murti= form or figure) but not the trinity or the Hindu traid representing Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The head gear is no doubt done in the form of *Jatamukuta*, the characteristic of Shiva as well as of Brahma. But as Brahma is represented with four faces, this bust cannot be this. Nor we can identify it with Vishnu, for he wears a *Kirita* and not a *Jata-mukuta*. Moreover, the principal sculptures in the cave belongs to the cult of Shiva. The trimurti, therefore, symbolises the

oneness of God. The three heads emanating from one and the same deity who can assume different forms and names in accordance with the functions he is performing.

The front or central face with a calm and dignified appearance represents Shiva as the creator. The lower lip is thick and the breast is adorned with several different necklaces. The front right hand is badly mutilated, excepting for a bangle on the wrist. The front left hand holds a *matulunga* or eitron. The head is adorned with a richly wrought *jatamukuta*, having a crescent high up on the right side. In front of the head is the royal tiara consisting of three large jewels, one of which is placed over the forehead, and the other two over the ears. The ears of this face are decorated with an ornament called *makarakundala* as it is shaped like a *makara* or crocodile, here carved in a conventional manner.

The face to the left representing Shiva as Rudra, the destroyer, has a severe look, cruel eyes, a curling moustache and a beard. The head dress serves as an abode for several snakes seen wriggling through the matted hair. The ornaments include some of the peculiar emblems of Shiva, such as the human skull seen over the left temple, and a large cobra with its expanded hood. The right hand, which is raised before the breast, holds a cobra twisted round the wrist.

The right face, represents Shiva as the preserver of the universe. The calm and pacific expression befits this aspect of deity. Of the three principal gods in the later Hindu mythology it is Vishnu who performs the function just as Brahma does that of creation. For a Saiva or devotee of Shiva, it is Shiva who is supreme and fulfils all these duties and in him all these gods are unified. The ears of this face appear to have been adorned with a *sankhapatra* or conch-like ornament, now partly broken. The hair escapes in very neatly curled ringlets from under the head-dress, which is very elaborately ornamented with pearl pendants. The left hand has bangles on the wrist similar to those on the two front hands, and holds a lotus.^{xvi}

Ganagadhara Shiva: -

Next to the Maheshmurti is the Gangadhara-murti panel, which narrates the story of the descent of the river Ganges from heaven to the earth. The king Bhagirath practiced severe austerities to win over the river Goddess Ganga, to persuade her to leave her heavenly abode and descend on the Earth. Ganga was pleased and agreed to leave her celestial abode but requested Bhagirath to persuade somebody to receive her fall, as otherwise the force of her descent on the earth would split it in half. Bhagirath again undertook severe penance to persuade Shiva to receive the powerful descent of the waters of the mighty river. Shiva was pleased and granted his request. To humble Ganga, who fell with great force, Shiva made her wind through his matted hair—which is symbolic of the variegated universe—thus, preventing her from descending.

Bhagirath once again prayed to Shiva, requesting him to allow Ganga to come down to the earth. Emerging from Shiva's locks, Ganga finally falls on the earth.

In sculptural form Ganga appears in the matted hair of the mighty Shiva. Because Ganga

descended on the earth due to Bhagirath's severe austerities, she is called Bhagirathi, the daughter of Bhagiratha. In the Elephanta panel, Shiva is seen standing with the right leg reclined. His left leg is bent a little at the knee. Shiva is of tall stature and slim body. His torso is inclined to the left. Over the head of Shiva are three heads representing the three sacred rivers of India, Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati. Shiva has four hands. On the left of Shiva, Parvati stands gracefully in the *tribhanga* pose. Her diaphanous lower garment is held in place by a girdle. She wears a simple crown and a few select ornaments.

This is one of the most beautiful panels at Elephanta. It is a masterpiece composition. The main attraction are the figures of Shiva and Parvati. There is a rhythm which binds these two figures together in a harmonious whole.^{xvii}

Kalyana-Sundara-Murti: -

Beautifully carved but much damaged panel representing the marriage of Shiva and Parvati. The figure is 10 feet 10 inches high. Parvati 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 occupying the place of nimbus or aureole. Parvati wears heavy ear-rings and many necklaces, from one of which a string hangs down between her breasts and ends in a tassel. The robe that hangs from her zone is indicated by a series of slight depressions between the thighs.

At Shiva's left, crouching on his hams, is a three-faced Brahma who is acting as priest in the ceremony.^{xviii}

Shiva Shrine/Linga Shrine: -

In approaching the trimurti we pass through a shrine or garbha of the temple on the right. It is entered by a door on each of the four sides, each approached by six steps, which raise the level of the floor of the sanctuary 3 feet 8 inches above that of the temple. On each side of the door there is gigantic dwarfpala or guard, from 14 feet 10 inches to 15 feet 2 inches in height, and each standing on a low base, several of them attended by dwarfs.

In the middle of the room stands a base or altar 9 feet 9 inches square, and about 3 feet high. In the centre of this is placed the Linga, cut from a stone from a harder and a closer grain than that in which the cave is executed. This plain stone is the symbol representative of Shiva as the male energy of production, or source of the generative power in nature as the yoni or the circle in which it stands is of the passive or female power- is the idol of the Shiva temple, the central object of worship, to which everything else is accessory or subsidiary.^{xix}

Andhakasura-vadha-murti:-

The panel in the northwest side of the cave, on the wall near west entrance and the Linga shrine, is an uncommon sculpture about the *Andhakasura-vadha* legend. It shows Bhairava,

or Virabhadra, a ferocious form of Shiva killing the demon *Andhaka* (literally, "blind, darkness"). The relief is much ruined below the waist, is 3.5 m (11 ft) high and posed in action. Though a relief, it is carved to give it a three-dimensional form, as if the ferocious Shiva is coming out of the rocks and impaling Andhaka with his trident.

Bhairava's headgear has a ruff on the back, a skull, and a cobra over the forehead, and the crescent high on the right. His facial expression is of anger, the conviction of something he must do, and one in the middle of the action. The legs and five of the eight arms are broken, attributed to Portuguese vandalism. The smaller broken image Andhaka is seen below Bhairava's image. Also depicted in his right hand is the symbolic weapon that Saiva mythology states Shiva used to kill the destructive elephant demon. A hand holds a bowl to collect the blood dripping from the slain Andhaka, which Saiva legend states was necessary because the dripping blood had the power to become new demons if they got nourished by the ground. Furthermore, the artwork shows ruined parts of a male and two female forms, figures of two ascetics, a small figure in front, a female figure, and two dwarfs. The uppermost part shows flying *apsaras* bringing garlands.^{xx}

Nataraja Shiva: -

Shiva is the divine master of dance. In Bharata's *Natyashastra* where 108 kinds of dance poses are listed, Shiva is proclaimed as the Nataraja, or king of dance. Dance is almost like a form of magic in its ability to transform the personality of the dancer, who appears to be possessed by supra-terrestrial powers in the process. Like yoga, dance induces ecstasy, the mergence with and experience of the divine. Dance is considered to be an act of creation.

The dancing figures of Shiva as Nataraja are some of the most attractive manifestations of the Indian art tradition. The dance posture depicted at Elephanta is what is described as *lalitam*. The figure's legs are broken as are some of the hands. Though the figure is mutilated, it has not lost its charm. The figure pulsates with life and movement, and has a rhythm and grace which even the broken limbs are not able to conceal. The face which is slightly tilted towards the left hand adds further charm to the figure. A number of musicians are shown seated around Nataraja, though in a damaged condition. The figure of Parvati also looks graceful. Other gods seen are Brahma, Ganesha and Kumara. Besides these there are other smaller panels of Kartikeya, Matrikas, Ganesa, Dvarapalas, etc^{xxi}

The Saiva Aiduka and a Motif at Elephanta: -

"Aiduka is a structure symbolizing the cosmic divinity or the entire unlimited infinite universe".

There is information in Chapter 84 of Part III of the *Visnudharmottara Purana* that may help to clarify the "bottle shaped" object flanked by celestials in the frieze above the Shiva slaying Andhaka relief at elephnata and somewhat less clearly, found above and within the panel of

Shiva and Parvati on Mt. Kailasa. This object was copied as far back as the 1760s by Anquetil du Perron and subsequently commented upon by William Erskine and John Wilson “**who both felt the object represented the mantra OM**”; Moor, J. Stevenson “**who thought it to be a linga with OM representing the Traid or deities**”, Burgees, Indrajī “**who suggested it is like a Buddhist relic shrine or daghoba with a heavy tee or umbrella above, but that it might be as well as a shrine to Shiva with a Linga within**”.

According to Priyabala Shah, this sacred object of worship includes the linga symbolic of Shiva as the central deity from which Vishnu emerges as a four-sided staff and in turn Brahma as a rounded staff. The four Lokapalas, who are the only figural decoration, not seem to be a structural part of the Aiduka but like an addition to provide the guards as is usually done in the case of such sacred structures.

Shah then discusses the etymology and the use of the word Aiduka and variants of it. According to her, eduka (Aiduka) was originally a wall or structure containing bones but later became any wall or structure with a strengthening material added such as bones. The prakrit root *ed* suggests that *aiduka* related to creation, so “It must have been a sort of shrine holding sacred relics in the form of bones”.^{xxiii}

Conclusion: -

Name itself says it all.. Elephanta, like an Elephant it is wide, big, unique and wonderful presentation of Lord Shiva’s incarnation or different forms. The murtis are damaged, but still one cannot deny the fact that, only a powerful kingdom and skill artisans could have built such marvellous architecture and solid

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