

Elephant Sculptures in the Buddhist Rock-Cut Architecture of Maharashtra

Yojana Bhagat

ABSTRACT

There are around 1200 Buddhist rock-cut architectural sculptures in India and of them 1000 are in Maharashtra. They date from 3rd BCE to 12th CE thus depicting in rock 1500 years of cultural, political, religious, social and technological history in general and history of changing philosophy of Buddhism [Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana] in particular.

The rock-cut architecture- popularly called as ‘caves’ [wrong nomenclature given by the western scholars] have large and small motifs of elephants in many groups. They are seen since the beginning and have undergone changes with time. This paper is an attempt to study the aspect of the elephant in rock-cut architecture.

After the general survey of elephant sculptures from the 1000 excavations we can categorize them into different phases.

- When the architect was not confident about the strength of the rock, very shallow sculptures in relief of elephants were carved. This could be the first phase of the elephant sculptures. In the Bhaje leni, sculptural depiction in relief of the elephant trampling the tree is still unidentified and controversial. This phase also has the Gajalakshmi in small relief on the doorways of the Pitalkhora leni, Thanale leni.
- At a glance some elephants look like the sculptural decoration, but if studied carefully they are part of the architectural scheme and are portrayed as the load bearers of the structure. This happens in the second phase of the architecture. The colossal elephants taking the load of the entire vihara on their shoulders at Pitalkhora leni, or the elephants taking the load of the verandah in the Karle leni is seen in this phase.
- The third phase could be the three dimensional pillar capitals of elephants with riders seen at Karle, Bedse, Nasik and so on. The life-size, free standing elephants on the entrances, mostly two on either side of the gateways, could also be put in this phase like the elephants at Kuda leni.

- The fourth phase again comes into the sculptures where the elephant is beautifully portrayed at Ajanta cetiyaghara at the sambodhi panel of the Buddha. It is the battle with the Mara and he on his Girimekhala charges on the meditating Buddha.

Thus this paper is an attempt to study the elephants from the rock-cut architecture and place them in phases according to the chronology and see whether the changes occurring are according to the political, religious, economical or philosophical changes.

Keywords: *Rock – cut architecture, Maharashtra, elephant sculptures*

Coordinator, Department of Pali, University of Mumbai, India
bhagatyojana@gmail.com