



JAI HO BHARAT...

# Elephanta

The City of Caves

**T**he island of Elephanta Caves, about 10 km. from the east side of the harbour in Mumbai, is a glorious abode of Lord Siva and an epitome of Hindu cave culture.

Discovered by Portuguese navigators, it consists of seven caves, with their decorated temples that bear a unique testimony to a civilization that has disappeared.

The striking collection of rock art in Elephanta Caves dates back to 6th to 8th century according to different specialists. There are two groups of caves. To the east, Stupa Hill (thus named because of a small brick Buddhist monument at the top) contains two caves, one of which is unfinished, and several cisterns.

To the west, the larger group consists of five rock-cut Hindu shrines, with the main cave universally famous for its carvings to the glory of Siva.

The cave consists of a square *mandapa* whose sides measure about 27 metres.

At the entrance to the cave, to the north of an esplanade reached by a steep flight of steps, the visitor is greeted by two large carved panels depicting, on the left, Siva as Yogisvara (Master of Yoga) and Nataraja (King of Dance), both treated in a monumental style close to that of the Gupta period.

On the right of the entrance stands a *Sivalinga*, symbol of all energy, with four doors, each flanked by colossal figures of *dvarapala*. On each wall of the *mandap*, enormous high reliefs

(maximum height 5.70 metres) present further pictures of Siva.

Opposite the entrance, on the south wall, is the famous and unforgettable three-headed bust of Mahadeva, whose three faces are the incarnation of three essential functions; to the east, *Aghora*, terrifying destroyer; to the west, *Vamadeva*, creator of joy and beauty; and in the centre, *Tatpuruṣa*, master of positive and negative principles and preserver of harmony.

On either side of this central figure, there are two other reliefs depicting Siva as Ardhanaṛisvara, and, on the right, Siva receiving the waters of the Ganges (*Gangadhara*). There are other reliefs from the legends, such as Siva-Paravati marriage and Siva killing the *asura*, Andhaka.

The 15 large reliefs surrounding the *lingam* in the main caves constitute one of the greatest examples of Indian art.

Elephanta Caves figure in the World Heritage List, and the Archaeological Survey of India protects the entire surroundings 🕯