Jogeshwari Cave, beneath the slum at Pratap Nagar in Mumbai, is a place for the locals to drink, study, or pray. Its 1,500-year-old sculpture of the elephant-headed god Ganesh has been painted bright orange.

*text and photographs by* Samir S. Patel

# The Slum and the Sacred Cave

## Neglect overtakes one of Mumbai's most important Hindu sites.

From an airplane approaching the airport in Mumbai (the megacity once called Bombay), a massive slum spreads below like a sea of rusted metal whipped up by a steady, salty wind. But from a speeding car on the city's new highways, the slums where 60 percent of the city's 18 million people live often aren't visible. And that's why Prabhu, my taxi driver, is asking for directions for a third time. We're looking for Jogeshwari Cave, a great Hindu monument that now lies within, and beneath, a dense slum community in northwest Mumbai.

Prabhu and I, along with Shri Manish, from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), turn off the Western Express Highway and onto progressively smaller roads until we reach a dirt track into a dense neighborhood called Pratap Nagar. Prabhu needs to use the horn a lot—as an "excuse me"—to clear the road of bicycles, beggars, and schoolchildren in tidy uniforms and knee socks. The buildings may be ramshackle, improvised, and illegal, but they're sturdy, with multiple floors. Bollywood music pumps out of vendors' stalls. Blue jeans hang on clotheslines. The smell of street food and burnt cooking oil tickles my nose. Manish leans forward to guide Prabhu and we stop in front of a narrow path, muddy with wastewater, that descends between rising rock walls to a dark doorway.

Jogeshwari, created around 1,500 years ago, is a rock-cut cave shrine to the Hindu god Shiva. In its scale, the cave complex rivals several UNESCO World Heritage sites nearby: the spectacular cave temples of Ajanta, Elephanta, and Ellora. In its design and ornamentation, Jogeshwari is transitional, with features reminiscent of older Buddhist caves and Hindu statues less refined than those that would appear later—a missing link in an evolutionary chain. "It connects the greatest Buddhist monument [Ajanta] with what many would say is the greatest Hindu monument [Elephanta]," says Walter Spink, an art historian at the University of Michigan who has studied Indian cave temples for decades. Jogeshwari's archaeological and art historical importance

**Illegal buildings loom over Jogeshwari's colonnaded porch. By law, all structures are prohibited within a 330-foot area around the monument. The tight proximity of shops and homes can be seen from the cave's back entrance, below.**

is matched only by its advanced state of neglect. Until recently, it was filled with garbage and squatters, and now the slum above closes in tighter and sewage leaks down the walls. Overlooked by scholars, neglected by the ASI, and forgotten by the people of Mumbai, Jogeshwari languishes while its progeny, the spectacular cave on Elephanta Island in Mumbai Harbor, has become one of the city's most visited and treasured tourist destinations.

In the state of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital, there are around 1,200 rock-hewn temples, dug and carved by hammer, chisel, and sweat from the basalt of the Deccan Plateau and ranging in size from small shrines to massive temple complexes. The tradition began with Buddhist shrines in the first and second centuries B.C. These monuments reached their apex under the Buddhist Vakataka Dynasty in the fifth century A.D. with the caves at Ajanta, a group of 30 gloriously carved and painted shrines in a gorge more than 200 miles east of Mumbai ("The Caves at Ajanta," November/December 1992). But it was not until the sixth century that Hindus in the region began to adopt the practice. "It is only at this stage, at this very, very late stage, that the Hindus start cutting their caves," says Vidya Dehejia, a historian of Indian and South Asian art at Columbia University. "Why they didn't do it earlier is just one of those mysteries."

After the death of the Vakataka king Harisena, who was patron for much of Ajanta, feudal rivalries overwhelmed the dynasty and it is thought that many of the artisans from Ajanta sought greener pastures. Some may have traveled west to the Hindu Kalacuri kingdom and began the first great Hindu cave temples—first at Jogeshwari and then at Elephanta. As Shaivite Hindus, the Kalacuris worshiped Shiva as the supreme god, rather than as part of the traditional Hindu trinity of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer. Under the early Kalacuri Dynasty, shrines to Shiva quickly achieved the scale and artistry of their Buddhist predecessors. But the most impressive and fully realized of the Hindu caves, Elephanta, and a similar cave called the Dhumar

Lena (one of 35 caves and temples spanning five centuries at the monumental complex at Ellora, near Ajanta), owe a debt to Jogeshwari. "In terms of Hindu cave temples, it's the father or the grandfather of them all," says Spink.

Spink first visited Jogeshwari in the 1960s, and recalls an unofficial dump just above the cave and squatters living in the niches inside. "It was quite a mess," he says. "Certainly in the rainy season it was very nasty." A 1999 pamphlet from the nonprofit Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, or INTACH, described Jogeshwari as one of the "worst maintained archaeological sites in the city." Other recent visitors describe pools of sewage and piles of garbage. By night, I have been told, the dark recesses of the cave are the perfect setting for drinking, drugs, sex, and criminal activity. And bats. Lots and lots of bats.

**In the cave's dark corners hide the shapes of ancient statues. Many are in an advanced state of degradation caused by water seepage, neglect, and other factors.**

I can hear the bats flapping around before my eyes adjust to the darkness. The path, actually the cave's back entrance, leads to a massive central hall studded with thick fluted pillars forming a square. Light pours in through a colonnaded sunken porch to the right. To the left, construction materials are piled up deep in the shadows. In the center is a *linga*, or a phallic shrine to Shiva, surrounded by cheap white tiles and lit with unsightly jury-rigged fluorescent tubes. A wood fire burns in front of the shrine and the smoke stings my eyes.

There are remains of friezes and statues throughout the cave, but most are heavily degraded and damaged. Near the other entrance, opposite where I came in, there is a Ganesh shrine dedicated to Shiva's elephant-headed son. An active site of worship for the community, the 1,500-year-old statue has been painted fluorescent orange and adorned with garlands. Two massive human guardian figures—"heavy colossi" as Spink once described them in an essay—stand on either side of a doorway beyond, along with fragments of ornamentation. "That doorway still bears tiny traces of a most complex architectural arrangement," Spink tells me later. "It makes you weep to think of what it must have been like and how much loss there is." And the loss here is impressive, caused by some combination of people, water, sewage, salty air, the scratching of animals, the detritus—both natural and man-made—that has collected in the caves over the years, and the often clumsy efforts to clean it out. "Everything should have been done to strengthen it," says Tasneem Mehta, an art historian with INTACH and

**Archaeologist Shri Manish surveys the cave's most pressing problem. The seepage has been reported as a concern for decades, but what once was just rainwater is now rank sewage.**

The differences between Jogeshwari and Elephanta are clear from above. Where one lies beneath a dense city, the other sits on an idyllic, mountainous island.

The figures that guard the *linga* shrines in the two caves show the development of sculptural style in the 6th century, from Jogeshwari's "heavy colossi" to Elephanta's more refined, svelte warriors.

the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum. "None of that was done and it fell into complete neglect."

"Jogeshwari is not merely something that requires some attention and care, but it also requires some study," says Dehejia. "The longer it goes unstudied, the less there is to study."

From what little scholarship there is on Jogeshwari—most of which comes from Spink—a few conclusions and connections can be drawn. He estimates that Jogeshwari was created about A.D. 520–525, a few decades after work had stopped at Ajanta and a few decades before Elephanta. The open porch is reminiscent of similar colonnaded entranceways in earlier Buddhist caves. The remaining statuary is clearly linked with the Shaivite sect that would go on to make other Hindu caves, but the design and shape of the cave is asymmetrical, improvisational, rambling. At 250 feet from one entrance to another, it is among the longest cave shrines, but it lacks the balance and overall plan and geometry that would eventually find expression at Elephanta and the Dhumar Lena. "Jogeshwari gives us the feeling of something tentative, where they weren't quite clear exactly what the plan was going to be," says Dehejia. Its "heavy colossi" are much less detailed and delicate than similar figures that appear in later caves, but they emerge from the wall in a way that older cave sculptures, such as those at Ajanta, did not.

"Even though [Ajanta] is very beautiful and the caves are magnificent, the sense of attachment to the wall is still there," says Mehta. "There isn't that sense of roundedness, there isn't that sense of almost freestanding three-dimensionality that you have in Elephanta and that you see as well in Jogeshwari."

The floor plan and statuary of Jogeshwari, and a nearby Hindu cave from the same period called Mandapeshwar (for photographs and information on Mandapeshwar, visit us online at www.archaeology.org), were early, tentative steps toward more fully realized monuments—the source of the artistic, cosmological, and geometric ideas that would later animate Elephanta, emerging from the Buddhist tradition like a *linga* from the basalt. "The prototype is Jogeshwari, so here they are formulating ideas as to how they should express their ideas," says A. Jamkhedkar, retired state archaeologist for Maharashtra. "And they get perfected at Elephanta."

On Mumbai's southeastern waterfront, in the shadow of the luxurious Taj Mahal Hotel, ferries line up to take tourists seven miles across the harbor, past shipping and oil depots, to Elephanta Island, a sparsely inhabited island of palm and mango trees. There, visitors climb a set of steps hemmed in tightly by hawkers and souvenir stands, or they can be carried up on a palanquin. Some tourists walk around with guidebooks. Others are led by scholar-guides with microphones and portable speakers.

Thick pillars, much like the ones at Jogeshwari, mark the wide entrance cut into the side of a mountain. Inside, light pours in from three sides, casting the Shiva sculptures on the walls into dramatic relief. Eight svelte and finely detailed

**A scholar-guide with a wireless headset shows tourists the teasures of Elephanta. Behind her, Shiva appears as the androgyne, the half-man, half-woman creator of all living things.**

guardians surround a massive *linga*. In the main cave there are 36 bays, or squares formed by a column in each corner, that correspond to the *mandalas*, or the diagrams that represent the Hindu universe. The highly geometric scheme, which is aligned with the cardinal points, highlights the cave's nine sculptural Shiva-based tableaus—a wrathful Shiva impales the demon Andhaka, a joyful one performs the dance of death, a meditative one presides as the lord of the Yogis. Smaller figures seem to pour from the corners of every niche. The main tripartite sculptural panel against the south wall shows Shiva bearing up the sacred river Ganga; Shiva as the half-man, half-woman creator of all living creatures; and, in the center, a 20-foot-high bust of the Sadashiva, or Eternal Shiva, who presides over all creation with what Spink describes as "serene authority," the "emergent cosmic man" rising from the rock. It is easy to see why Elephanta is considered one of the greatest Hindu monuments, and after visiting Jogeshwari, it is also easy to see how it came to be.

"Elephanta is much more impressive, though you might even say that Jogeshwari is more interesting because it is more varied. It's a transitional monument," says Spink. "Jogeshwari is interesting because it's so much in process."

Like Jogeshwari, Elephanta—even after its UNESCO designation—had problems with security, maintenance, and cleanliness. Bernard Feilden, a renowned architectural historian, visited Elephanta in 1995 and was stunned by the garbage, the lack of guards, and the way visitors climbed all over the sculptures. He wrote to the ASI, which is responsible for the security and maintenance of significant archaeological sites nationwide, threatening to recommend delisting the site. Eventually INTACH developed, secured funding for, and implemented a comprehensive management plan for the caves and a sustainable development plan for the island's only permanent settlement. But Elephanta is on a remote island without electricity or cars and with few permanent inhabitants, so the management plan there met with little resistance. It will not be the same in Jogeshwari.

"Something like Jogeshwari that is in the midst of a bustling community that is growing around it is most susceptible," says Dehejia. "It's really in danger, I think."

After my initial sense of wonder at Jogeshwari wears off, I start to see some of its more telling details. A man sleeps on a ledge in the corner. A young family and their priest light tea candles and pray on the porch. A little boy in a school uniform follows me around. There is little trash around—thanks to a stooped man with a broom, a recently appointed ASI attendant—but a few moments later a garbage bag from the slum houses above lands on the porch with a "plaff." I recall Jamkhedkar's warning: "You cannot see some of these caves without putting your foot in the slime." Moments later I misstep and plop my foot in a smelly algae-ringed puddle of raw sewage. I follow the stream that feeds the puddle to cracks in the wall that connect directly to the houses above. The state of the cave is

**Locals are accustomed to using Jogeshwari as a place to pray. The Archaeological Survey of India, wary of protests, will continue to allow them to do so, but will emphasize caretaking and responsible use.**

not as bad as I had worried it might be, but the slum weighs very heavily on it.

"Bombay is such a place, nowhere do you see clean open space," says G. S. Narasimhan, head of the ASI in Mumbai, as we talk on the tidy grounds of ASI's office on a suburban hilltop near a boarding school alive with chirping kids. The demand for space is so acute that illegal building, especially in slum areas, is almost beyond control. Legally, the land within 330 feet of Jogeshwari, and all ASI-managed monuments, should be clear, and another 330 feet highly regulated. At Jogeshwari, substantial buildings go right up to the edges of the cave, and are now starting to appear almost directly on top. Both entrances to the cave pass through narrow spaces between buildings, which seem to teeter precariously over the open porch. There are rumors that an illegal construction project has already caused significant damage to part of the cave.

"Somebody, somewhere along the line, has allowed these people to build," says Mehta. "It's absolute nonsense that we don't have policing power. We can't do anything. That's nonsense."

Narasimhan says the problem is less about India's endemic corruption than about the time it takes the bureaucracy to react. New construction, such as the work around Jogeshwari, happens so fast that little can be done about it until it is too late. In April 2005, citing the horrible state of the cave, Bhagwanji Rayani, director of Janhit Manch, a public interest litigation group, filed suit on behalf of Jogeshwari and three other largely neglected or forgotten cave shrines in the city: Mandapeshwar, Mahakali, and Kanheri. The high court ordered the formation of a committee to oversee the future of the caves. The committee, which is chaired by Narasimhan of the ASI, visited Jogeshwari last summer, and based on their report, the high court judge demanded that the protected zone be cleared of illegal buildings. But the slum above Jogeshwari is not a mere shantytown, and clearing such a space will involve major effort and disruption. There is skepticism, Jamkhedkar tells me, that it is even possible.

Narasimhan says that the removal of the encroachments is the second phase of their plan after more immediate efforts to document, protect, and maintain the site. He claims that the Mumbai ASI office, which was formally established only in 2005, now has the proximity, budget, and staff of more than 75 to take significant action at Jogeshwari. The attendant there now was a recent addition, and Narasimhan says that 24-hour care is on the immediate horizon.

"Ultimately, we are responsible for our acts of commission and omission," Narasimhan says, with candor uncharacteristic of Indian government agencies. "It is very important in the development of rock-cut architecture, and it has not been given due care."

Whatever changes the ASI makes are likely to meet with resistance. Those who live in the illegal structures will protest, as will the thousands who use the cave for worship or illicit activities. "For two or three decades, people had been used to a certain type of usage of the monument," says Narasimhan. Education and interaction with the archaeologists, he stresses, are the only way to create a sense of responsibility. "This problem will never be solved," the archaeologist Jamkhedkar says glumly. "I don't want to blame anybody, but basically it is a total lack of any interest whatsoever in the departments of culture and a total negligence on the part of the people of India."

Despite the wealth of deep, complex cultural heritage in India, sites such as Jogeshwari often do not matter for their own sake, but only for what they provide—tourist dollars, a place to pray during the day, a place to hide or drink at night. "It's almost inevitable in a country in which resources are that limited and there are so many other crying priorities," says Dehejia. "But we're probably going to regret at some stage neglecting these sites."

Jogeshwari's status as a key evolutionary step from one great Indian monument to another—not to mention its austere beauty, the way light cascades between the pillars and smoke hides the corners, the authoritative mass of its guardian figures, the surprising surviving detail on its friezes and ornamentation—has yet to garner the attention needed to distinguish it from the rest of India's heritage. Compared with Elephanta, Jogeshwari has a kind of natural, raw power as a place where you can see ideas being tried and cosmology being defined, where you can almost hear the clinking of Kalacuri chisels.

"If we can just reconstruct it with our eyes to some degree, and our minds too, it stands right up as a fantastic achievement," says Spink. ■

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