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Research Article

Monolithic Jinās: The Iconography and Architectural Importance of the Jain Temples at Ellora

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Abstract

The Jain temples at Ellora, carved during the ninth century CE under Rashtrakuta rule, stand among the most extraordinary examples of monolithic rock-cut architecture in India. Excavated directly from solid basalt using the top-down method, these temples were not built stone by stone but revealed from within the mountain itself. This article examines the five Jain caves at Ellora - especially the magnificent Indra Sabha and Jagannath Sabha - exploring their construction, layout, decoration, and sacred statuary. It argues that nothing in these temples is merely decorative: every pillar, wall, ceiling pattern, and statue was designed to express core Jain values of detachment, purity, equality, and inward spiritual focus. While previous scholarship has documented Ellora's history and styles, this study demonstrates that architecture and iconography together form a unified teaching system - a physical sermon in stone. The temples do not only show Jainism; they embody it.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ellora lies in central India, in the state of Maharashtra, about thirty kilometres from the city of Aurangabad. Here, a long, sweeping cliff of dark basalt rock stretches for more than two kilometres. Carved directly into this cliff face are over thirty magnificent temples. They were created between the sixth and tenth centuries CE, and are arranged in three clear groups: first the Buddhist caves, then the Hindu caves, and finally, at the northernmost end of the cliff, the Jain temples. These five sacred caves were carved mainly in the ninth century, during the reign of the Rashtrakuta dynasty. Although the Rashtrakuta kings followed the Hindu faith, they were renowned for their generosity and tolerance toward all religions. They gave land, resources, and royal protection to Jain communities, allowing them to create monuments of extraordinary scale and beauty.¹

What makes the Jain temples at Ellora truly remarkable is that they are monolithic. This means they were not constructed by placing stones one upon another. They have no bricks, no mortar, no joins. Instead, artisans cut away the rock around the temple form, beginning at the very top and working slowly downward, until the entire structure stood free - roof, walls, pillars, statues, and floor, all one continuous piece of stone. The temple was not built; it was uncovered, revealed from within the living rock.²

This article explores these Jain temples in depth. It asks three main questions: How were these monolithic temples created, and what does their method of construction tell us about Jain beliefs? What do the Tirthankara statues represent, and how do their posture, form, and detail carry spiritual meaning? And why do these temples remain so important - historically, religiously, and architecturally?

This study argues that in the Jain temples at Ellora, form follows faith. Nothing is accidental. The method of carving, the layout of space, the choice of material, the posture of every statue, and the arrangement of light and shadow all carry deliberate spiritual meaning. Architecture and religion are not separate here. The temple itself is a sacred teaching, made visible in stone.³

¹ Srinivasan, K. R. *Ellora*, 34–36.

² Hegewald, Julia A. B. *Jaina Temple Architecture in India*, 47–49.

³ Ibid., 59–61.

Historical Background and Setting

To understand the Jain temples at Ellora, one must understand the time and place in which they were created. The ninth century in central India was a period of peace, prosperity, and remarkable religious freedom. The Rashtrakuta Empire ruled over a vast territory stretching across much of western and central India. Their capital was at Manyakheta, and their power was matched by their deep commitment to supporting religion, learning, and the arts. Although the royal family worshipped Hindu deities, they respected and patronised all religious traditions equally. Kings invited scholars, gave gifts to monks of every faith, and permitted religious communities to build

freely within their lands. This atmosphere of tolerance and support was the foundation upon which the Jain temples at Ellora were built.⁴

By this period, Jainism had already existed in India for more than one thousand years. It was a well-established, respected, and flourishing religion, particularly strong among merchant communities in western India. The Digambara branch of Jainism was especially influential in this region. Digambara monks lived lives of extreme simplicity: they owned nothing, wore no clothing, and devoted themselves entirely to spiritual discipline. The lay community supported these monks, and built temples as an act of devotion, merit, and public service.⁵

Ellora was chosen as the site for these great temples for two important reasons. First, the rock here is of exceptional quality. It is fine-grained basalt — hard, durable, and smooth enough to take the most delicate carvings, yet strong enough to stand for thousands of years without crumbling. Second, Ellora lay on an ancient trade route. Merchants, pilgrims, and travellers passed this way constantly. Building temples here meant that the Jain faith could be seen, honoured, and remembered by all who journeyed past. Unlike many other major Jain pilgrimage sites such as Palitana or Śravanabelāgola - which sit high upon hilltops, the Jain temples at Ellora were carved at ground level. They were deliberately placed so that anyone could approach them. No steep climb was needed. The sacred was made accessible.⁶

The work at Ellora continued for generations. Kings passed away. Master artisans grew old and were replaced by new craftsmen. Yet the vision remained consistent. The same rules, the same proportions, the same deep respect for restraint and calm guided every chisel stroke. Over decades, the five temples emerged from the cliff - Indra Sabha, Jagannath Sabha, and three smaller caves - together forming one of the greatest groups of Jain monuments in the entire country.⁷

⁴ Dundas, Paul. *The Jains*, 164–66.

⁵ Ibid., 32–35.

⁶ Srinivasan, *Ellora*, 40–41.

⁷ Hegewald, *Jaina Temple Architecture in India*, 51–52.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Ellora and its temples falls into three broad areas. First, archaeological and descriptive work has carefully recorded the caves, their dates, their layout, and their condition. K. R. Srinivasan's official survey provides a thorough overview of all three groups of caves at Ellora, including measurements, descriptions, and historical context for the Jain temples. He explains when they were built, under which kings, and how they relate to one another. However, his focus is archaeological and factual rather than interpretive. He describes what the temples contain, but does not explore deeply what they mean.⁸ Second, scholarship on Jain temple architecture has identified the design principles, patterns, and traditions followed across India. Julia Hegewald detailed study of Jain temple architecture explains how Jain sacred spaces differ from Hindu and Buddhist temples - particularly in their symmetry, their

restrained decoration, and their clear progression from outer world to inner sanctuary. She shows that Jain temples are built according to consistent spatial rules that have remained remarkably stable across centuries and regions.⁹ George Michell explains the broader principles of Indian sacred architecture, including orientation, layout, and the symbolic meaning of different parts of a temple.¹⁰

Third, studies of Jain iconography have documented the forms, postures, and symbols used in sacred images. U. P. Shah's comprehensive work on Jain iconography describes the standard rules for carving Tirthankara statues, including measurements, proportions, postures, and identifying emblems. He provides a clear guide to how images should look according to traditional texts.¹¹ John E. Cort explores how these images were understood and used by devotees, and how ideas about sacred images changed over time within Jain tradition.¹² Paul Dundas explains the religious beliefs and practices that lie behind the images, including the significance of the nude form in Digambara tradition.¹³

However, one important connection remains underexplored: how the method of carving, the arrangement of space, and the design of statues all work together as one unified system to teach Jain values. Most scholars treat architecture and iconography separately. They describe the building, or they describe the statues - but they rarely show how the building itself is part of the message. This article demonstrates that at Ellora, the rock, the space, the pillars, the ceiling, and the statues all speak the same language. Every part of the temple preaches the same truth.

⁸ Srinivasan, Ellora, 49–51.

⁹ Hegewald, *Jaina Temple Architecture in India*, 18–20.

¹⁰ Michell, George. *The Hindu Temple*, 14–16.

¹¹ Shah, U. P. *Jaina Iconography*, 12–15.

¹² Cort, John E. *Framing the Jina*, 71–73.

¹³ Dundas, *The Jains*, 170–71.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive research design. Its aim is not to measure, count, or rank features, but to understand what the temples mean within their religious and historical context. The research draws upon four main sources of evidence:

First, published archaeological reports and official site documentation provide accurate descriptions, measurements, and historical dating for each cave. These sources establish what exists, where it is, and when it was created.

Second, scholarly works on Jain architecture, iconography, and belief provide the necessary background to recognise traditional forms, rules, and meanings. By comparing Ellora with other Jain sites across India, we can see which features follow ancient tradition and which are specific to Ellora.

Third, comparative analysis is used to highlight what is distinctively Jain. Because Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain temples all stand side by side along the same cliff at Ellora, we can compare their design, decoration, and imagery directly. This

comparison makes the unique qualities of the Jain temples much clearer.

Fourth, close interpretive reading of form and space is used to understand the visitor's experience. By imagining the path of a pilgrim - from the bright sunlight outside, through the courtyard, into the pillared hall, and finally into the quiet inner shrine - we can understand how the temple itself shapes religious experience.¹⁴

This approach prioritises depth of insight over broad generalisation. The goal is not to claim that all Jain temples are exactly like Ellora, but to show that at this remarkable site, every architectural choice was guided by religious belief. The temple was not just built to be looked at. It was built to be experienced, understood, and spiritually transformed.

¹⁴ Hegewald, *Jaina Temple Architecture in India*, 56–58.

The Monolithic Method: Revealing the Temple from Rock

The most extraordinary feature of the Jain temples at Ellora is the way they were made. Every temple was carved from the top down. Artisans did not start at ground level and build upward. They did not lift stones or place them into position. Instead, they began at the roof - high above the ground - and worked slowly downward, removing rock layer by layer, until the complete temple stood revealed.¹⁵

Here is how the process worked:

1. First, artisans marked out the exact outer shape of the temple on the surface of the cliff.
2. They cut a deep trench straight down into the rock, following the marked outline.
3. Standing on the rock above, they carved the roof first, complete with all its patterns and details.
4. Then they worked downward, revealing the ceiling, then the upper parts of the pillars, then the walls, then the statues, and finally the floor.
5. As they removed more and more rock, they stood lower and lower, until the entire temple stood free, open to the sky.¹⁶

This method required immense skill, patience, and planning. The artisans could never step back and see the complete temple until it was finished. If they carved a pillar in the wrong place, or made a wall too thin, there was no way to correct the mistake. Everything had to be planned perfectly before the first chisel ever struck the rock. They were not building a temple. They were revealing a form that already existed, hidden inside the mountain. They simply removed everything that was not the temple.¹⁷

This remarkable method was not chosen only because the rock was suitable. It carries deep spiritual meaning - one that lies at the very heart of Jain belief. In Jainism, the soul is described as being naturally perfect, pure, and infinitely wise. However, it is covered and obscured by layers of karma - invisible subtle matter that clings to the soul due to our thoughts, words, and actions. The spiritual path, therefore, is not about gaining something new. It is about removing what covers the soul, so that its natural perfection can shine forth. This is exactly what

the artisans did. They removed the outer layers of rock to reveal the perfect form that lay hidden within. **The carving of the temple was itself a picture of the spiritual life. **¹⁸ Furthermore, because the temple is one single piece of rock, it has no joins, no breaks, no separate parts fitted together. It is whole, complete, and unbroken. This too represents the Jain understanding of truth. The highest truth is one, whole, and indivisible. It does not come in separate pieces. It does not depend on anything outside itself. Just as the temple is one continuous stone, so the truth is one continuous reality. ¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid., 52–54.

¹⁶ Michell, *The Hindu Temple*, 60–62.

¹⁷ Hegewald, *Jaina Temple Architecture in India*, 53–54.

¹⁸ Dundas, *The Jains*, 166–67.

¹⁹ Hegewald, *Jaina Temple Architecture in India*, 58–59.

Indra Sabha: Layout and the Spiritual Journey

The largest, most complete, and most magnificent of all the Jain caves at Ellora is called Indra Sabha - the Hall of Indra. It is a masterpiece of rock-cut architecture, and its design follows a clear, carefully planned path that mirrors the spiritual journey itself. Every part of the layout carries meaning. Every step takes the visitor deeper - away from the world and toward the sacred. ²⁰

The temple unfolds in four stages

First, the open courtyard. The visitor approaches from the bright sunlight of the modern world. They step into a large, open courtyard cut deep into the cliff face. On three sides, the courtyard is open to the sky. At the back stands the temple itself. This open space represents ordinary life - the world we know, bright, busy, and full of activity. Before entering the sacred space, one must pause, prepare, and leave the outer world behind. ²¹

Second, the central shrine. In the very middle of the courtyard stands a small, independent shrine, facing east. It is reached by steps, and it holds a large statue of a Tirthankara. This central shrine acts as a first introduction to the sacred. It stands alone, visible to all, and marks the centre of the temple's spiritual gravity. ²²

Third, the pillared hall. At the back of the courtyard, the visitor enters the main temple hall. Twelve massive, heavy pillars stand in perfect rows. They are strong, square, and solid. The bright sunlight softens into gentle shade. The noise of the courtyard fades away. This hall represents the stage of learning, reflection, and discipline. Here, one prepares the mind and heart to approach the sacred. The twelve pillars are said to represent the twelve months of the year, or the twelve great virtues that support the spiritual life. Everything is ordered, balanced, and calm. ²³

Fourth, the inner sanctuary. At the very back of the pillared hall, deepest within the rock, lies the garbhagriha - the womb chamber. It is small, dim, and quiet. A single statue stands facing east, toward the light. There are no windows. There is no decoration. This is the heart of the temple. This is the goal. ²⁴

When a pilgrim walks this path — from bright sun to open courtyard, through the pillared hall, and finally into the dim silence of the inner shrine — they are re-enacting the spiritual journey described in Jain texts. They are leaving the outer world behind. They are turning away from distraction. They are moving inward. And finally, in the quiet darkness, they stand face to face with the sacred image. The physical journey is also an inner journey. The temple does not just show the path. It guides you along it. ²⁵

The entire plan is roughly square. Every wall is balanced by an opposite wall. Every pillar has its match. Nothing leans. Nothing is out of place. This perfect symmetry was not chosen for beauty alone. Jainism teaches that the universe is built upon order, balance, and harmony. The temple was designed to reflect that cosmic balance. When you stand inside it, you feel that order. You feel the calm. The architecture itself teaches peace. ²⁶

²⁰ Srinivasan, Ellora, 41–43.

²¹ Hegewald, *Jaina Temple Architecture in India*, 54–55.

²² Srinivasan, Ellora, 42–43.

²³ Hegewald, *Jaina Temple Architecture in India*, 55–56.

²⁴ Michell, *The Hindu Temple*, 63–64.

²⁵ Cort, *Framing the Jina*, 82–84.

²⁶ Michell, *The Hindu Temple*, 62–63.

Pillars, Ceilings, and Decoration

The pillars of the Jain temples at Ellora are remarkably consistent in design. Each one has a square base, an eight-sided middle section, and a rounded capital at the top. They are not slender or delicate. They stand firm, solid, and heavy, like great tree's rooted deep in the earth. This strength carries meaning: the teachings of the Jina are firm, unshakable, and eternal. They do not change with fashion, opinion, or time. ²⁷

Above the pillars, the ceilings are carved with wonderful detail. Flowers, vines, and geometric patterns spread across the stone. In the centre of many ceiling panels is a large, beautifully carved lotus flower, blooming in full glory. This is not merely decoration. The lotus is one of the most important symbols in all of Indian religion. It grows from the mud at the bottom of a pond, rises through the water, and opens pure and beautiful above the surface. It is born from the mud, yet it is not stained by the mud. This is exactly what the Jain spiritual life is meant to be: living in the world, yet remaining pure and unstained by it. ²⁸

Yet there is something very important to notice about all the decoration at Ellora: it is never crowded, excessive, or distracting. Even where the carving is rich and detailed, there is always space, calm, and restraint. The decoration frames the sacred image; it never competes with it. This too is a Jain value. The faith teaches moderation, simplicity, and control over the senses. Even in grandeur, there must be discipline. Even in beauty, there must be calm. ²⁹

The walls are carved with rows of statues, each placed in its own orderly niche. Each statue stands clearly visible. Nothing

is hidden. Nothing is overcrowded. Every part has its place. Every detail serves the whole.³⁰

²⁷ Srinivasan, Ellora, 44–45.

²⁸ Shah, Jaina Iconography, 31–33.

²⁹ Hegewald, Jaina Temple Architecture in India, 59–60.

³⁰ Srinivasan, Ellora, 45–46.

The Tirthankara Statues: Posture and Inner Peace

The walls, niches, and shrines of the Jain temples at Ellora are filled with statues of the Tirthankaras - the great spiritual teachers who appear in the world to show others the path to liberation. Every statue follows very strict, ancient rules of form and posture. The artisans did not invent new designs. They did not express personal creativity. They carved exactly according to tradition, because the form of the Tirthankara is considered sacred and teaching in itself.³¹

The statues appear in two main, standard postures

The Seated Posture - Padmāsana

In this posture, the Tirthankara sits cross-legged, just as a lotus flower sits upon the water. Both hands rest gently in the lap, palms facing upward. The back is perfectly straight. The head is held high. The eyes are closed, or looking softly downward. The face carries a calm, gentle expression - not a smile of amusement, but the deep, peaceful calm of one who has found perfect tranquillity within.³²

This posture represents meditation and inner knowledge. The Tirthankara is not looking out at the world. He is not watching what happens around him. He is looking within. He has found the truth inside his own soul. This posture teaches a central Jain truth: liberation cannot be found in money, power, fame, or outward success. It can only be found by turning inward, calming the mind, and discovering the pure wisdom that already lies within.³³

The Standing Posture - Kāyotsarga

In this posture, the Tirthankara stands upright, perfectly still. His arms hang naturally at his sides, hands open and relaxed, not touching his body. His legs are straight. His whole body is motionless. He stands like a pillar — firm, steady, and unshaken. Sometimes, delicate vines are carved climbing around his legs. This ancient detail tells a story: the Tirthankara stood in meditation so long that plants grew up around him — yet he never moved. He remained completely unmoved.³⁴

This posture represents detachment and spiritual discipline. It shows the liberated being standing alone, needing nothing, unaffected by heat or cold, by praise or blame, by pleasure or pain. He stands steady while the whole world changes around him. This is the highest ideal of Jainism: to remain calm, balanced, and unmoved by every change that life brings.³⁵

³¹ Shah, Jaina Iconography, 41–43.

³² Ibid., 45–47.

³³ Dundas, The Jains, 168–69.

³⁴ Shah, Jaina Iconography, 47–49.

³⁵ Dundas, The Jains, 169–70.

The Nude Form: Freedom and Purity

Every single Tirthankara statue in the Jain temples at Ellora is shown completely nude. There is no cloth, no robe, no jewellery, no ornament of any kind. This is not an artistic style. It is a statement of the deepest religious belief.

These temples belong to the Digambara branch of Jainism. The word Digambara means "skyclad" - clothed only in the atmosphere. Digambara monks wear no clothing. They own nothing. They possess nothing. They have renounced every attachment. And so, the Tirthankara - the perfectly liberated being - is also shown nude.³⁶

The nude form carries three powerful, interwoven meanings

First, total freedom from attachment. Clothing is a possession. It is something you wear, something you carry, something you depend upon. To be completely free of all attachment, one must be free even of clothing. The nude form shows that the liberated soul needs nothing. It depends on nothing outside itself.³⁷

Second, absolute purity of the soul. In Jain belief, the soul in its natural state is pure, brilliant, and perfect. It carries no mark, no stain, no covering. Clothing represents the things we add to ourselves — our status, our wealth, our social role, our worldly identity. The nude form strips all that away. It shows the soul as it truly is: pure, unadorned, and equal to every other soul.³⁸

Third, perfect equality. Before the light of truth, all human beings are equal. There is no king and no servant. No rich and no poor. No high and no low. Rank, status, and wealth belong to the outer world. They do not belong to the soul. The nude statues show this clearly: every Tirthankara looks exactly the same. No one wears more jewellery. No one sits higher. They are all equal.³⁹

This is why the statues are so simple. They wear no crowns. They carry no weapons. They hold no gifts. They have nothing — and because they have nothing, they lack nothing. They are complete. They are perfect. This simplicity is the most powerful message of all.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ibid., 170–71.

³⁷ Cort, Framing the Jina, 85–87.

³⁸ Dundas, The Jains, 171–72.

³⁹ Hegewald, Jaina Temple Architecture in India, 55–56.

⁴⁰ Cort, Framing the Jina, 87–88.

Symbols, Emblems, and Identification

At first glance, all the Tirthankara statues look almost identical. They have the same posture, the same calm face, the same serene expression. This is intentional. It shows that every Tirthankara has reached the same goal. Every one teaches the same truth. They are all equal in their liberation.⁴¹

However, each one has a special, small identifying mark - an animal emblem - carved clearly upon the throne beneath him.

This emblem tells the devotee exactly which Tirthankara is being honoured:

- Rishabhanātha, the first Tirthankara, has a bull.
- Ajitanātha has an elephant.
- Pārśvanātha, the twenty-third Tirthankara, has a snake.
- Mahāvīra, the twenty-fourth and last Tirthankara of this age, has a lion.⁴²

These emblems are small, modestly placed, and never draw attention away from the figure itself. But for those who know the tradition, they speak clearly. They preserve the identity of each teacher, while showing that their inner nature is the same.⁴³

Above the head of every Tirthankara, a simple plain halo is carved into the rock. It has no rays, no decoration, no colour. It signifies enlightenment - the pure, calm light of knowledge that shines from every liberated being. It is not a crown of power. It is the natural radiance of the soul.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Shah, Jaina Iconography, 51–52.

⁴² Ibid., 52–54.

⁴³ Srinivasan, Ellora, 46–47.

⁴⁴ Shah, Jaina Iconography, 54–55.

Attendants, Heavenly Beings, and Devotion

The Tirthankara is always the central, most important figure in every carving. He sits or stands alone, calm and unmoved. But around him, respectfully placed to the sides and slightly smaller, artisans carved other figures: attendants, heavenly beings, divine mothers, and worshippers.⁴⁵

Some attendants stand holding flywhisks, showing the utmost respect. Others hold flowers or garlands, offering honour to the Tirthankara. Some stand with hands pressed together in reverence. These figures represent the entire universe - gods, humans, and heavenly beings - all turning toward the Jina, all honouring the teacher. They show that the Tirthankara is worthy of reverence from every living being.⁴⁶

Yet there is a deliberate contrast between the Tirthankara and those who surround him. The attendants are busy. They are active. They are emotional. They bow, they worship, they admire. The Tirthankara, by contrast, remains perfectly still. He does not respond. He does not smile or nod. He does not reward or punish. He simply is - calm, silent, and at peace.⁴⁷

This contrast carries a clear teaching. The devotee moves, feels, and acts. The liberated soul remains still. The statues show you what you are working toward. They show you the goal. One day, you too may stand calm and unmoved, while the world moves around you.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Cort, Framing the Jina, 87–88.

⁴⁶ Srinivasan, Ellora, 47–48.

⁴⁷ Cort, Framing the Jina, 88–89.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 89–90.

The Inner Shrine: Silence and the Light Within

At the very back of every temple, deepest within the rock, lies the garbhagriha - the womb chamber, or inner sanctuary. It is

the smallest, darkest, quietest room in the entire temple. There are no windows. There are no carvings on the walls. A single statue stands facing east, toward the light. A small lamp burns before it. This is the heart of the temple.⁴⁹

The inner shrine is deliberately dark. Why? Because when you cannot see the distractions of the outer world, you can begin to see within yourself. The darkness removes everything else. Only the statue remains - dimly lit, silent, and still. In that quiet light, the devotee stands face to face with the image. And through the image, they stand face to face with the truth it represents.⁵⁰

The statue is not a god to be begged for favours. It does not hear prayers. It does not grant wishes. It is a mirror. It shows you what you too can become. When you stand before it in the dim light, you are not worshipping a distant being. You are seeing your own highest potential. The silence of the shrine helps you to hear that truth.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Hegewald, Jaina Temple Architecture in India, 56–57.

⁵⁰ Michell, The Hindu Temple, 63–64.

⁵¹ Cort, Framing the Jina, 89–90.

Material, Colour, and Enduring Truth

The Jain temples at Ellora are carved from dark basalt rock. Over twelve centuries, the stone has darkened further, turning a deep, rich brown. It is not white marble — the material most commonly used in later Jain temples, chosen because it symbolises purity. At Ellora, the rock is dark, heavy, and strong.⁵²

This dark stone carries its own meaning. It is the colour of the earth. It is the colour of things that endure. It does not shine or sparkle. It does not change colour in the light. It remains the same - steady, serious, and unchanging. This was chosen intentionally. The Jain faith is not new, it is not fashionable, it does not change with every generation. It is as old as truth itself - and as solid as rock.⁵³

Because the temple is one with the mountain, it feels permanent. It feels as though it will stand forever. This too carries meaning. The teachings of the Jina do not pass away. They are eternal. Just as the mountain stands through rain, storm, and sunshine, so the truth stands through every age.⁵⁴

⁵² Srinivasan, Ellora, 48–49.

⁵³ Hegewald, Jaina Temple Architecture in India, 58–59.

⁵⁴ Dundas, The Jains, 171–73.

Comparison with Buddhist and Hindu Caves at Ellora

Ellora is unique because Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain temples all stand side by side along the same cliff. They were carved by the same people, in the same rock, at roughly the same time. Comparing them makes the unique character of the Jain temples very clear.⁵⁵

The Buddhist caves are the simplest. They focus on one large statue of the Buddha, calm and gentle. The feeling is quiet, soft, and inward-looking.

The Hindu caves are grand, dramatic, and full of story. The statues show gods dancing, fighting demons, ruling the universe, and displaying their power. They are active, colourful, and exciting. They tell you what the gods do.

The Jain caves are quiet, still, and restrained. The statues do not dance. They do not fight. They do not rule. They simply sit. Or stand. Calm. Silent. Perfect. They do not show you what the gods do. They show you what the liberated soul is.⁵⁶

The Hindu temples impress you with power and drama. The Jain temples invite you to stop, be still, and look within yourself. This is the great difference. At Ellora, the three faiths stand together, each teaching in its own way. And the Jain temples teach silence, stillness, and self-mastery.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Michell, *The Hindu Temple*, 64–65.

⁵⁶ Cort, *Framing the Jina*, 90–92.

⁵⁷ Michell, *The Hindu Temple*, 64–65.

Religious Importance: Architecture as Teaching

The greatest importance of the Jain temples at Ellora lies in this: every part of them is a teaching tool. Nothing is accidental. Nothing is just decoration. From the moment you approach the temple until the moment you leave, every stone speaks.

- They are carved from the top down → begin with the highest spiritual goal, then work downward into daily life.
- They are one single piece of rock → truth is one, whole, and unbroken.
- The path leads inward from light to darkness and silence → the truth you seek lies deep within your own soul.
- The statues are calm and still → peace comes from mastering yourself, not from controlling the world.
- The statues are nude and simple → possess nothing, so that nothing possesses you.
- The layout is symmetrical and balanced → the spiritual life is one of order, harmony, and self-control.⁵⁸

This is why these temples are so remarkable. They do not just show you the faith. They place you inside the faith. When you walk through Indra Sabha, you are not just reading about Jainism. You are experiencing its values. You are practising its ideals. The architecture itself is a form of worship.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Hegewald, *Jaina Temple Architecture in India*, 59–60.

⁵⁹ Cort, *Framing the Jina*, 92–93.

Historical and Artistic Significance

Historically, the Jain temples at Ellora prove something very important: by the ninth century, Jainism was a powerful, respected, and flourishing religion in India. It had royal support, wealthy and generous patrons, skilled artisans, and large, thriving communities. It was not a small or marginal tradition. It was a major religious force, capable of creating monuments that rival the very best in the entire country.⁶⁰

Artistically, these temples represent the high point of the Digambara monolithic tradition. Nowhere else in India is there such a complete, well-preserved, and beautifully executed

group of rock-cut Jain temples. They show us exactly what the rules were, exactly what the statues should look like, and exactly how the sacred space should be arranged - all perfectly preserved, without being rebuilt, altered, or restored over centuries. They are a window into the ninth-century Jain world, frozen in stone.⁶¹

They also show us that religion and art were one and the same. The artisans who carved these temples were not merely stonecutters doing a job. They were people of deep faith. They did not carve for money or fame. They carved as an act of devotion. Every chisel stroke was an offering. Every statue was a way of understanding the divine.⁶²

⁶⁰ Srinivasan, *Ellora*, 49–51.

⁶¹ Shah, *Jaina Iconography*, 55–57.

⁶² Dundas, *The Jains*, 172–73.

4. CONCLUSION

The Jain temples at Ellora stand among the greatest achievements in the entire history of Indian art. Carved from a single cliff face, without brick, mortar, or joined stone, they reveal what human patience, skill, and faith can achieve. Artisans worked from the top downward, removing what was not sacred, to reveal the perfection that lay hidden within the rock. Their work was not just construction. It was a spiritual parable made real.

But the true greatness of these temples lies not in their size, their age, or their remarkable method of carving. It lies in their simplicity, their calm, and their clarity. The statues are not grand, dramatic, or terrifying. They do not boast. They do not threaten. They simply sit, or stand, in perfect peace. They teach that the highest power is not power over others - it is mastery over oneself. They teach that true freedom comes from wanting less, not from having more. They teach that the greatest treasure lies hidden within, waiting to be uncovered - just as the temple was uncovered from the rock.

The artisans who carved these temples are long gone. The kings who supported them are forgotten. Twelve hundred years have passed since the first chisel struck the cliff. Yet the temples remain. The stone still stands. The statues still gaze calmly across the centuries, unchanged by time. And the message they carry remains as true today as it was in the ninth century: be still, be pure, be free — and the truth will reveal itself, just as the temple reveals itself from the rock.

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