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Narratives of a place named Ellora: Myths, culture and politics

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Ellora is the place where caves associated with different sects and religions were carved over a span of at least 800 years. While the caves, narrowly understood, have been the subject of many studies, the 'place', as a site of political and social interaction, has been largely neglected. Ellora was larger than just the caves; it was a place with a long history where traders, monks, artisans and armies brought in different ideas, reconsidered the old and innovated upon cultural traditions that reflected on their own identities and their relationship with Ellora. These people and their actions stamped the place with meaning and identity, which accrued over time—sometimes exclusive, at other times hybrid, but inevitably transformative. Ellora was an important site that conjured multivalent sensibilities, more complex than many other places. This article uses toponym as an analytic focus to bring into play different subjects—the historical agents, religious organisations, monuments and textual materials—that provided structure and meaning to the Ellora Caves at different historical junctures. It argues how the place and people in power have different kinds of relationships with the past, especially when it is not their past but one that they need to master. The impact of material change and transition in the production of historical materials is particularly striking when studied in the long duration with focus on a relatively small but politically significant site.

Keywords: Ellora, Deccan history, Puranas, toponym, epigraphs, myth, memory, narratives

Ellora Caves are one of the most visible and popular UNESCO heritage sites in India today. These caves were carved from the basalt rock face of the Sahyadri mountain range in the present-day village of Verula in the district of Aurangabad in Maharashtra. The famous Buddhist caves of Ajanta and Aurangabad are not too far off. Ellora Caves, however, are distinct because there are Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jaina caves at the same site, running on the north–south axis, flanked by two waterfalls in either direction. Such a multi-religious coexistence of cave structure

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is unique, though one can read contesting sectarian ideologies and patronage in the nomenclature and sculptures of these caves at different times in the past. This is also evident in the scholarship on Ellora, prominently by Burgess, Fergusson and Brown,¹ on the Buddhist epigraphy and architecture, as well as by Dhavalikar, Bilgrami, Mahajan and Gupte²; Ranade on the art and history of the caves³; and photographic essays by Gil, Berkson.⁴ Kannal, and Sondara Rajan have focused on the sculptural styles⁵; Yazdani and Jouveau-Dubreuil and Dikshtar have written a detailed political history of the region⁶; while studies by Sondara Rajan on the Rastrakutas⁷ and Dikshit on Chalukyas⁸ are useful to understand Ellora, apart from the colonial administrative writers and travellers.⁹ In recent times, there have been more focused studies on the Buddhist caves by Gupte and Malandra,¹⁰ and a detailed study by Brancaccio on the Aurangabad caves,¹¹ while Owen has written a concise and authoritative history of the Jaina caves at Ellora.¹² What is, however, lacking in this huge scholarship on the Ellora Caves and the history of Deccan is attention to Ellora itself, the ‘place’ and its culture *beyond* the documented 34 caves (Figure 1).¹³

Ellora is the place where these caves associated with different sects and religions were carved over a span of at least 800 years—the ‘place’ is also a bearer of these identities, which were, at different times, exclusive and also hybrid. This was a place where the path of people of different ideas and persuasions crossed. These people, monks and traders, in particular, brought in and innovated upon cultural

¹ Burgess, *Report on the Elura Cave Temples and the Brahmanical and Jaina Caves in Western Indian*; idem, *Report on the Buddhist Cave Temples*; idem, *A Guide to Elura Cave Temples*; James Burgess, and Indrājī Bhagvānlal. *Inscriptions from the Cave-Temples of Western India*. James Fergusson, *Rock-cut Temples of India*; Fergusson and Burgess. *The Cave Temples of India*; Brown, *Indian Architecture, Buddhist and Hindu Periods*.

² Dhavalikar, *Ellora*; Bilgrāmī, *A Short Guide to the Cave Temples of Elura*; Mahajan and Gupte, *Ajanta, Ellora and Aurangabad Caves*.

³ Rānaḍe, *Ellora Paintings*.

⁴ Gill, *The Rock-Cut Temples of India*; Berkson, *Ellora*, 2004.

⁵ Kannal, *Ellora*; also, Parimoo, Kannal, and Panikkar, *Ellora Caves*; Soundara Rajan, *Art of South India*.

⁶ Jouveau-Dubreuil and Dikshitar, *Ancient History of the Deccan*; Yazdani, *History of the Deccan*; and idem, *The Early History of the Deccan*, 2013.

⁷ Soundara Rajan, *The Ellora Monoliths*; idem, *Cave Temples of the Deccan*; idem, *Rock Cut Temple Styles*; idem, *Architecture of the Early Hindu Temples of Andhra Pradesh*.

⁸ Dikshit, *Political History of the Chalukyas of Badami*.

⁹ The earliest among this is Mallet, ‘Description of the Caves or Excavations’; Elliot, *Views in the East*; and the books influenced by them, like Srinivas Rao and Bhawanrao alias Balasaheb Pant Pratinidhi, *Ellora: A Handbook of Verul (Ellora Caves)*. Later examples, like Crane, *India Impressions with some notes of Ceylone, during a Winter Tour, 1906-7*.

¹⁰ Gupte, *The Art Iconography of the Buddhist Sculptures (caves) of Ellora*; also, Gupte, *Iconography of the Hindus, Buddhists and Jains*; Malandra, *Unfolding a Maṇḍala*.

¹¹ Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*.

¹² Owen, *Carving Devotion in the Jaina Caves at Ellora*.

¹³ Exceptions may be, Soar, ‘The Tirtha at Ellora’, pp. 80–103; Sohani, ‘Continuities in the Sacred Landscape’, pp. 156–68.

Figure 1. Panoramic View of Ellora Caves: Sketch by James Walls and Thomas Daniell 1778, published 1816



Source: India Office Collection, British Library Board, London.

traditions, which had a bearing on the everyday life of people of this place. Ellora, therefore, is larger than just these caves—it was an important site that should conjure multivalent sensibilities, more complex than many other places. But how does the toponym Ellora communicate these complex, layered sensitivities? This article uses toponym as an analytic focus to bring into play different subjects—historical agents, religious organisations, monuments and textual materials—that provided structure and meaning to Ellora at different historical junctures. It explores the different kinds of relationships that the people in power have with the past, especially when it is not *their* past but one that they need to master. Scholarship on toponyms is scant, and it is, therefore, not surprising that little attempt has been made to look into the place named Ellora as well. This is perhaps because of our narrow presumption that culture is spatially rooted, while the ‘place’, hence toponym, is a given. Thus people, place and culture are assumed to be organically tied—the place and culture belonging to ‘naturally’ localised people, understood usually as a monolith.¹⁴ The study of place-names instead questions how place, culture and communities are constructions that are informed by the social and political processes of place making, conceived in the ‘ideas’ and ‘embodied practices’ that

¹⁴ Gupta and Ferguson. *Culture, Power, Place*, p. 3; Berg and Vuolteenaho, *Critical Toponymies*, pp. 1–18.

shape identities and possibly enable resistance.¹⁵ It is presumed that the principle of sameness and similarity plays a significant role in the making of community, but, at the same time, the idea of community is also built around the notions of exclusivity and otherness.¹⁶ It is through this notion of exclusivity and otherness that the multivalent reading, naming and manipulations in the names of a place are constructed. Toponymic studies are also about the context through which the symbolic landscape is manipulated, which, in turn, is used as an identity-marker and acts as an instrument of political legitimisation. This in many cases constructs a sense of nationalism. Hence, the place-name that evokes a specific memory is altered and new memories are fashioned that reflect the changed power relations between the place and political agency.¹⁷

The study of toponym is, moreover, more than the location of a physical space. It is rather an analysis of how places are created and evolve historically over time, where different social, cultural and political forces act in a specific way that mirrors their views and experiences of the specific as well as larger social and political world in different and, sometimes, competing ways.¹⁸ The story of Ellora is also an account of the politics that shapes the place-name. The textual validation of the place-name, however, represents many pasts, identities and cultural traditions that characterise the caves and space beyond it. It also means that the larger contextual space—the village beyond the caves that has its own temples and *tīrthas*—cannot be ignored.¹⁹ The identity, culture and politics of these residents and the caves themselves are a part of a larger space that cannot be segregated. While the place remains the same, the perspectives about the caves change along with the shifting religious and cultural identities of the place.

Using textual sources—the Puranas, epigraphs and medieval Muslim chronicles—and archival material, the article takes a *longue durée* perspective to map how the concerns of a locality change over time and how these politics are reflected in the subtle changes in the toponym. I interrogate how the narratives of change, which are both regional and national, reflect on the changing culture of the locality and discuss how the concerns of the locality have its own implications for the region. The article charts how the story of change, with subtle twists in the legitimating myth, develops over time, and how its central content appears synchronic even though additions to it keep challenging the existing frames.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7; *Ibid.*, *Critical Toponymies*, p. 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–19.

¹⁷ Saparov, 'Contested Spaces', pp. 534–54; Kabachnik, 'The Power of Place, or Powerless Places?' pp. 265–85.

¹⁸ Mitchell and Alderman, 'A Street Named for a King', p. 123.

¹⁹ Sahoni argues that Ellora, Khuldabad and *Griṣṇeśvara* should be seen in continuity as one complex irrespective of difference in time and patronage, 'Continuities in the Sacred Landscape', p. 156.

Buddhist–Hindu Past: Epigraphic Evidence

The earliest name that comes to us of these caves is *Velūra* or *Velūraka* in the Karli inscription around c. 150 CE. This was in the context of patronage provided for the maintenance and sustenance of the sangha, the Buddhist religious community that sheltered in these caves. Burgess, who translated the inscription, thinks *Velūra* to be the earlier name of Karli caves without assigning any reason, a gloss that has uncritically crept into the scholarship on the Buddhist caves.²⁰ This distancing from Ellora has, in turn, resulted in a failure to take cognisance of this inscription in the context of the Ellora Buddhist Caves. This has affected their dating, which is done mostly on stylistic assumptions.²¹ Considering that Buddhist caves were also coming up at Aurangabad around this time,²² which is in close spatial proximity to Ellora, its role as a halting place for pilgrims and Buddhist traders cannot be missed. Sohani argues that Ellora was ‘demonstrably a Buddhist monastic-mercantile complex in its early phase’, and the influence of the Buddhist caves on early Brahmanical caves suggests that the Buddhist settlers appeared prior to Brahmanical inroads in this site.²³ Moreover, since the Karli inscription refers to the Buddhist caves as *Velūra*, which is semantically closer to *Elūr* or Ellora than Karli, it is safe to presume that the reference in this inscription is to Ellora.

That new cave sites of Aurangabad and Ellora were being developed on the Paithan–Sopara trade route on the western Sahyadri mountain range is not surprising for commercial and political reasons. This was the phase when most of this region was under the political sway of the Satavahanas and Ksatrapas or the western Sakas, the prominent political dynasties that patronised Buddhism along with Brahmanism in this region. The first caves belong to this period and date from early 150 CE to fifth century CE.

The two inscriptions from Karli, numbers 13 and 14, mention *Velūra*²⁴ should not be confusing since donations to different sites of different religions were made and inscribed elsewhere as a common practice. For instance, an endowment to the

²⁰ Burgess, *Archaeological Survey of Western India*, p. 38.

²¹ Most scholars have dated the Ellora caves stylistically from the beginning of the fifth to sixth centuries at the earliest, along with early Brahmanical caves. Prominent recent scholarship includes, Malandra, *Unfolding a Maṇḍala*. In Malandra’s chronological sequence, in fact, Brahmanical caves came first, ca. 550–600 CE, followed by the Buddhist, ca. 600–730, and a later phase of Brahmanical and Jaina caves after 700. Malandra’s dating is, however, swayed by the presumption of dominance of Vajrayana elements that has resulted in this dating. She writes that chronologically Cave 6 (600 CE) is the earliest, with ‘simple tantric forms in the cave’ to a splendid and dominant representation in Cave 12 (ca. 730 CE). Owen, *Carving Ellora*, follows Malandra’s dating and suggests that Dumar Leni was the first Brahmanical cave excavated, but later on, the activity shifted to the Buddhist caves, pp. 6–10. Also see Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*. For general dating of the Buddhist caves in Deccan, though not Ellora, see Dehejia, *Early Buddhist Rock Cut Temples*.

²² Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*; Ray, *Aurangabad Sculptures*.

²³ Sohani, ‘Continuities in the Sacred Landscape’, p. 156.

²⁴ Burgess and Bhagvānlal, *Inscriptions from the Cave-Temples of Western India*, pp. 33–34.

Brahmanical deities and the caves of *Veḷūra* were made at Prabhasa in Gujarat. However, that the inscription was recovered from Karli is indicative of the status of Karli on the Buddhist pilgrimage map around this time. Karli being the older site and on the same trade route perhaps controlled the access of monks to *Veḷūra*, which was small and not as prominent a site. Perhaps *Veḷūra* as a *Vihara*, the residential quarters, was only operational during the rainy season. According to inscription number 13 from Karli:

Usabhdatta, the son-in-law of the king Khaharita Khatapa Nahapana, who gave gold, and cows during a holy pilgrimage to the tirtha at Banasa river, who endowed the Brahmanical deities and Brahmanas; who had visited Prabhasa; he gave the village of Karjaka to the sanghas of ascetics from the four quarter residing in the *leṇis* (caves) of *Veḷūra*, all dwelling there for the support during the rainy season.²⁵

The inscription was issued on the banks of Banasa River, a prominent river that originates in the Aravalli Range and, running through southern Gujarat, drains out near Patan into the Rann of Kutch. The donor, a local feudal lord, was on pilgrimage to Prabhasa Patan, a region that also housed Buddhist caves, and was a prominent port of commerce on the Arabian Sea, doing brisk trade particularly with the Arabs and Persians. The donation of a village was to support the monks living in Ellora Caves, called *Veḷūra* caves (*veḷūrkesu leṇa*). The association of *Veḷūra* with Ellora, though contested by Burgess—who transcribed and translated the inscription—is also perhaps based on the way words are pronounced and then Sanskritised. Later records suggest the homophonic variants: *Yeḷūr* Sanskritised as *Veḷūra*, and later *Eḷūr*, which was anglicised as Ellora. Since late medieval times, the place is known as *Verūla*.²⁶

That patronage was provided to the Buddhist caves in Ellora as early as the second century CE is also consistent with the fact that the Satavahanas patronised early Buddhism in the Ellora–Aurangabad–Ajanta region. This was a community of peripatetic monks from India and other regions, notably Sri Lanka, and included some adherents of the Brahmanical religion, particularly the Saivas. Contemporary to the Karli epigraph, inscriptions from Nagarjunakonda, a prominent Buddhist centre in the third and fourth centuries, attests to the movement of the Sri Lankan monks in this region and their attempts to convert people to Buddhism. According to these inscriptions, the shrine at Nagarjunakonda was ‘dedicated to the fraternities of Ceylonese monks who had converted Kasmira (Kashmir), Gandhara (Afghanistan), China, Calāṭa (Skt. Kirāṭa), Tosali (Odisha), Avaranta (Skt. Aparanta), Vanga (i.e., Bengal), Vanavasi (North Karnataka, including the region of Ellora), Tavana (?),

²⁵ *dayipata veḷūrkesu leṇāvāsan pavajitan catudiśśagasa/yapanātha gamo karijako dato svanām [ba] savasitanām//*

²⁶ Firishtha, *Tarikh-i Firishtah*, p. 472.

Damila (?), and the Isle of Tambapamni (i.e., Ceylon)'. Avaranta (Skt. Aparanta) was the designation of the tract of the country lying along the western coast of the Peninsula, the capital of which was Sopara, the prominent port of calling for most traders operating at this time. According to the Ceylonese Chronicles, it was converted to Buddhism by Dhammarakkhita.²⁷

In the context of keeping the caves functioning to meet with the demands of pilgrim monks and for their occupation during the longer months of rainy season, the second inscription from Karli, number 14, is more important as it was issued by Vasistiputra Pulumayi, the Satavahana ruler (r. 110–38 CE or 138–59 CE?; Ptolemy refers to him as Siritolemaios). Vasistiputra simultaneously gifted a 'cave-façade' and *kaṭāha* or bamboo-lattice (railing) on the *Caitya* of cave-X at Ajanta.²⁸ He similarly donated a village to meet the expenses of carrying repairs at Ellora Caves. The suggestion is undoubtedly that the caves were in operation for some duration when this grant was made.

King (*rāno*) Vasistiputra, the illustrious lord (*samiśrī*) [Pulumayi] in the year seventh (7), of summer the fifth (5) fortnight, and first (1) day. On that day Somadeva, a great warrior, the son of Vasathi and Mitadeva, the son of Kosiki, a great warrior of the Okhalakiyas, gave a village to the sangha of *Vaḷūraka*. This gift is for the repairs of the *Vaḷūraka leṇis* (caves).²⁹

Unlike the Buddhist caves at other sites in western Maharashtra—Nasik, Kanheri, Karli, Bhaja—Ellora was also the site for Brahmanical caves, which took over from the later Buddhist caves around the fifth century CE. Thus, there must have been a time when the Buddhist and Brahmanical caves were being carved simultaneously under the Kalacuris and the later Calukayas,³⁰ the prominent dynasty that was supplanted by the Rastrakutas who are famed for building the magnificent Kailasa Temple (cave 16), which stands out as it was hewed from top to bottom and not inwards from outside as in other caves (see Figure 2). Though the excavation process is huge in Ellora, there is little epigraphic evidence about the architectural creative process or about its sustenance.

Of the little evidence that we have, the earliest copper plate discovered from Ellora was issued by Dantidugra in 742 CE (Saka 663) bearing the seal of Garuda, the emblem of the Rastrakuta dynasty. The grant, also the earliest site of establishing Rastrakuta genealogy, was originally made at *Elāpūlā* (*Elāpurā* and later Ellora)

²⁷ Vogel, 'Prakrit Inscriptions from a Buddhist Site at Nagarjunikonda', pp. 2–7.

²⁸ Rock Inscription 1 on the Caitya, Cave X at Ajanta, Burgess and Bhagvanlal, *Inscriptions from the Cave-Temples of Western India*, p. 67.

²⁹ Line 3. *Mahārathina Vasiṣṭiputran somadeven grāmo dattah veḷūrakasāṅghye veḷūrkaleyānanam samśkārakaraṇayae deye aisah//*

³⁰ Owen, *Carving Ellora*, suggests this possibility, p. 6. The chronological sequence in Malandra's *Unfolding a Maṇḍala* suggests the possibility of such an occurrence between the early Buddhist and late Brahmanical caves.

Figure 2. View of the Kailasanath Temple Ellora. James Fergusson's Illustrations of the Rock Cut Temples of India. Lithograph by Thomas Colman Dibdin, 1839



Source: India Office Collection, British Library Board, London.

by the donor after bathing in the *Guheśvara* tirtha. This is considered the same as *Ghrīṣveśvara* (*Griṣeśvara*) of Ellora, one of the 12 Jyotirlingas, perhaps conflated with the Puraṇic *Ghuṣmeśvara*.³¹ The grant points out the connection of the dynasty with southern Gujarat since Dantidurga's mother, a Calukyan princess, came from Bhavnagar. It is therefore not surprising that 'all the donees in the inscription hail from Navasarika or Navsari in present Baroda.'³² Dantidurga was still a feudatory when the grant was issued and perhaps obtained freedom only around 747 CE, as is evident from the Ellora Dasavatara cave inscription, which was carved out in his reign. This 29½ line inscription begins with a eulogy to Siva and Parvati and goes on

³¹ *Śiva Purāṇa* (SP hereafter) calls it *Ghuṣmeśvara*. It is useful to keep in mind the tradition of twelve Jyotirlingas (the eternally illuminated icons), the last one being *Ghuṣmeśvara*, as recounted in the *Śiva Purāṇa* (SP III. 42: 2–4), which has been later called as *Griṣeśvara* and *Guheśvara*. *Ghuṣmeśvara* form of Siva is the form of indulgence in which Siva 'conferred bliss on *Ghuṣmā*' (SP III.42:52). Siva manifested himself in a lake near Devasaila (a mountain in the Godavari region, associated with Ellora mountain) and was pleased with the devotion of *Ghuṣmā* so much so that he revived her son who had been killed by Sudehya (SP III.53–54). As a boon to the devotees, he thereafter stayed in the form of *Ghuṣmeśvara jyotirlinga* (SP III.55).

³² Dikshit, 'Ellora Plate of Dantidurga: Saka 663', pp. 25–26.

to establish the genealogy of the Rastrakuta dynasty whose contemporaneous ruler, Dantidurga, is described as ‘the ruler of all lands’ (*yasya-akhanditā-vikramasya*).³³ Enigmatically, the inscription ends abruptly after announcing that the Rastrakuta ruler, ‘approached with the army and stayed at the temple (*yattādevārthim*), Ellora, and after taking bath (*sñāntibhi*) next day met the Gurjendra (the ruler of Gurjaras of Gujarāt)’.³⁴

Chronologically, the most significant inscription about the Kailasanath temple is the 812 CE ‘Baroda grant of Gujarat king Karkaraja’, which informs that the Kailasa Temple at *Elapura* was completed during the reign of Krisnaraja I of the Rastrakuta dynasty. The beauty of architecture is captured in the language of wonder:³⁵

(That king), by whom, verily, was caused to be constructed a temple on the hill at *Elāpurā*, a wonderful structure, on seeing which the best of immortals who move in celestial cars, struck with astonishment, think much constantly, saying, ‘This temple of Siva is self-existent (*aitasva [sva]yambhu sivadhāma*); in a thing made by art such beauty is not seen’, a temple the architect-builder of which, in consequence of the failure of his energy as regards (the construction of) another such work, was himself suddenly struck with astonishment (*vismayamāpa śilpī*), saying, Oh, how was it that I built it!’

Apart from extolling the beauty of the temple, the inscription conspicuously uses the toponym *Elāpurā* for the place. Was *Elāpurā* a consensually arrived name? Was it accepted by all the religious communities operating in the area? This is doubtful as the Jains later called it *Carṇādri* or the mount of mendicants, a pilgrimage site like Kailasa that was built by the legendry Bharata—a subtle reference to the Ellora Kailasanath temple. Such variants, as *Carṇādri* were usually ignored by invoking the early history, as referenced through Bharata.³⁶ The silence around Ellora, thus, is loaded with political overtones since the original toponym is no longer mentioned because it was genealogically associated with the Calukyas and later territorially with the Rastrakutas. These dynasties were supplanted by their feudatories, the Seunas or Yadvas, who derived descent from Vasudeva-Krisna. Like Krisna, the Jaina ‘protector of faith’ also called himself a ‘[fifth] Vasudeva’. In Jaina canonical literature, Vasudeva is a class of warrior hero with the fifth being the incarnation of *Nara* or human. Is this a conscious conflation of the Jaina tradition with the emerging political dynasty in this region? This is very likely when we realise that at a later time when the Yadvas ruled from Deogir (later Daulatabad), very close

³³ Burgess, *Report on the Ellora Cave*, p. 89.

³⁴ Burgess and Bhagvanlal, *Inscriptions from the Cave-Temples of Western India*, pp. 95–96.

³⁵ Bhandarkar, ‘The Kailash Temple at Elura’, pp. 237–38, and also the earlier version by Bhandarkar, ‘The Rāṣṭrakūṭa King Kṛṣṇarāja I and Elāpura’, pp. 228–30.

³⁶ Parsavnath Inscription of the Saka year 1156 (1234–1235 CE), Burgess and Bhagvanlal Indrajī Pandit 1881, p. 99.

to Ellora, they patronised the Jainas. And we need to keep in mind that other than the Jains, no other community accepted the toponym *Carṇādri*; *Eḷūr* was the more prevalent toponym used in heterogeneous textual traditions as late as the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries.³⁷

Myth Making and Political-Genealogy: Lunar Race and Puranic Evidence

The political significance of the period around the fifth and sixth centuries CE is important to keep in mind. The Kalacuris and later the Calukyas were at the height of their power from the mid-sixth to the mid-eighth century. They ruled over vast stretches of South India, Maharashtra, Gujarat, central India and as far as Bengal, before they ceded it to the Rastrakutas.³⁸ As far as Ellora is concerned, the later Buddhist caves and the early Brahmanical caves came up in this period.³⁹ This was a period when Buddhism virtually merged into Brahmanism, owing primarily to the dominance of the Vajrayana elements coming into the Buddhist cave art and such elements permeating into and being adopted by the Brahmanical cults as well. Thus, the predominant figuration of Devi or Sakti in both these religions facilitated the correspondence of one into the other, blurring the visual and the religious ritual boundaries between the two. This was also the phase when fewer Buddhist monks arrived from Southeast Asia, and by the ninth century, there would only be a trickle until it stopped after the twelfth century.

Mythical Connections and the Making of a Dynasty

Genealogies are often issued to mark a historical change either at the point of claiming the throne, asserting independence or at the time of dynastic crisis.⁴⁰ Often, historical claims are made metaphorically or by invoking associations that legitimates the descent as well as comparison. Such a comparison was made in ‘The Mahakuṭa Pillar Inscription of Mangalesa’, wherein Kirtivarmana I, the Calukyan ruler (r. 566–610 CE), in ascendance over the entire Deccan, including Ellora, was conferred with ‘the military *vīrūḍa* (proclamation, eulogy) of *Pūruraṇaparākrama*’, that is, valour in war like Puru.⁴¹ While the military laudation and celebration is understandable, the comparison with Puru becomes significant as the Calukyas sought a genealogical linkage with the Pururavas, the progenitor of the *Soma-vamśa*, or the lunar race, and a direct descent from Hariti (*hariti-putra*). This genealogy

³⁷ Sohani, ‘Continuities in the Sacred Landscape’, p. 157.

³⁸ Mirashi, *Inscriptions of the Kalacuri-Cedi Era*.

³⁹ Following Spink, Brancaccio suggests that the earliest Brahmanical caves came under the patronage of Kalacuri rulers, particularly Caves 29 and 21 towards the end of the sixth century. Spink, ‘Ellora’s Earliest Phase’, pp. 11–22, and also, Brancaccio, *Ajanta to Ellora*, pp. 145–50.

⁴⁰ Sharma, ‘Lineage, Power and Perception’, pp. 389–408; Thapar, ‘Genealogical Patterns as Perception of the Past’, pp. 1–36.

⁴¹ Dikshit, *Political History of the Chalukyas*, p. 39.

also provided ancestral linkage with Puru, the son of legendary emperor of Puranic antiquity, Yayati.⁴² The inscription alleges that like the legendary King Puru, Kirtivarmana too became the sovereign ruler, who carved the realm after defeating the Rastrakutas of Manapura in the mid-sixth century CE. Earlier, the western Deccan was ruled by local dynasties, the Bhojas, the Traikutas, the Kalacuris and the early Rastrakutas of Manapura. The Calukyas were the vassals of the Rastrakutas, who were defeated by Kirtivarmana I and made to accept his suzerainty.⁴³

The genealogical link is important to understand the process by which the place name Ellora also emerged. In a later Calukyan inscription of 1112 CE from Dharwar in Karnataka, the Calukyan descent is reformulated as *Hariti-pañcaśikhā* or the five branches of Harita, referring to the various clans ruling over time from Kalyani, Vanavasi, Gujarat, Vengi and Lata. However, the common mythical lineage, which the Calukyas shared with the Kadambas, the competing dynasty whom they cast alongside in a shared genealogy, is emphasised by revisiting the genealogical linkages. What is of interest is that the Calukyas projected themselves as of Luni-Solar descent, having reconciled the *Somavamśa* with the *Suryavamśa*. The descent is traced through Budha (Mercury), the son of Candra or Moon, who had as his wife *Īlā*, the daughter of Ikṣvaku, the progenitor of the solar clan (Manu Vaivasvata, who was a son of the Prajapati Kasyapa by Aditi, and to him there was born Ikṣvaku, whose daughter was *Īlā*).⁴⁴ Their son was Pururavas, ‘an increaser of the Lunar Race’.⁴⁵

Vs 15: Aditi was born to Daksa, the patriarch, who was a pearl from the matrix of the nails of the beautiful feet of Hiranyagarbha. To Aditi and the patriarch

⁴² Puru was the youngest of the five sons of Yayati, who bestowed his kingdom to Puru, for his loyalty and obedience, valour and foresight (*Vayu Purāṇa*, II.31) in defiance to the established succession by primogeniture.

⁴³ Dikshit, *Political History of the Chalukyas*, p. 39.

⁴⁴ Barnett, ‘Inscription at Ittagi’, p. 42.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–58,

vs 15: *Hiranyagarbha-caru-chāraṇa-nakha-sukti-mukṭaphalan-en Daksa-prajapatig-Āditi puttidal-Āditigam jagach-citra-karma-kuśa(sa) enisīda Kāśyapa-prājapatigam samasta-locanan-enisida Vivasvaṃt Vīvasvaṃtāmge Manu-niti-nipuṇan-enisid(ā)neya//*

vs 16: *Mann-Vaivasvatan-a Vaivavatamg-Ikṣvāku-kṣitisam janiyā(yi) sidan-a nripa Ilaa-deviy-empa sate puttidalattalu//Anupama-hema-tamarasagarbhb manasa-patran-Atri tan-muni-pati-netraputrikege puttida nāmdānan-Imdu-m mandanān-amṛt-amṣu tat-priyā-sūtam Budhau-unnata-Soma-vamśa-varādhānān-ogedain Budhamgav-Ilegam pr kriti-ravaṃ Pūrnrāva//*

vs 17 *A rājā-rājan-enipa Pūrnrāvaniṃd-soma-vamśadol-adam Hariti-Pañcaśikhān-akhil-ārati-nareṃdra-mauli-le [khi] caraṇa//*

vs 18 *Palarum Haritigadar-ssu-/ tar-ātala-dharā-bharā-dhaureya-bāhabalār-a bhubhṛt-kul-agresārare modale[] ayu Cālukya-vamśam vilāsa-lakṣmīlatā-vellitamakhilā-jagat-tumgaṃ n[] yaso-nirṃmalā-muktā-ratna-garbham sakala-kula-kubhṛd-vamśa-lābdha prāśam//*

Kasyapa, who was a skilful artificer of the carved figures of the world, was born Vivasvanta, [Vivasvanta, the Sun] of the all-seeing eye; to Vivasvanta (was born) the seventh Manu, Vaivasvata, who was skilled in the polity of the Manu; to Vaivasvata (was born) king Ikshvaku; to this monarch was then born a daughter named Ilā-devi. (Verse 16) The mind-born son of him who dwelt in the womb of the peerless golden lotus [Brahmana] was Atri. The son born from the pupil of the eye of this lordly saint was the nectar-rayed [Moon-god], ornament of [Siva] who wears the moon-diadem. His beloved son was Budha (Mercury). To Budha and Ilā was born Pururavas, an increaser of the exalted Lunar Race, voiced in widespread fame. (Verse 17) In the distinguished Lunar Race was (born) from this king of kings Pururavas Hariti Pancasikha, whose feet were scraped by the diadems of all hostile monarchs. (Verse 18) To Hariti were (born) many sons having strength of arm fit to bear the incomparable burden of the earth. With these leaders of royal races as ancestors arose the Calukya race, which is tremulous with brilliant creeping-plants of fortune, exalted above the whole world, a source of flawless pearls of lofty glory, appropriating eulogies from dynasties of monarchs of all races.

The significance of this genealogical linkage lies not only in the connections made but also in the larger story after which the place henceforth came to be known as *Elāpuri* and thereafter corrupted to *Elūr* and Ellora, and this region named as *Ilāvṛta* and *Elācala*. The centrality of Ellora to the Calukyas may also be determined from the above-mentioned genealogical inscription where they even appropriated the Rasttrakutas description for Kailasa to the temple of Mahadeva they built in Dharwar⁴⁶:

Vs 66: When the god's lofty abode was displayed, which was indeed worthy to belong to the God of Gods, (this) Siva of a General caused those who only looked at it to feel amazement, so that they said: 'This is unprecedented; even Brahma does not understand how to contrive (or) imitate it; it verily deserves to be styled a Guru to Visvakarma for (teaching him) skill in other works'.⁴⁷

The story of the place name, moreover, acquires significance in the context of political and religious shifts. The coming of the Brahmanical caves also coincide with the development of the Puranic texts, where the story of Ilāvṛta region is expounded and elaborated whereby this region came to be known as *Elūr*, prominently associated with Siva and Parvati. Even in the Puranic literature (fourth to tenth centuries CE), the story develops as two stories, with significant variations, and, later, both are fused into one. Thus, the story of the place name and lineage

⁴⁶ Barnett, 'Inscription at Ittagi', p. 56, text, p. 47.

⁴⁷ *Id-apūrvam Brahmānum nirmisāl-āriyan-idam polal-a Viśvakarmaṅg-ide dal-karmm-amtara praudi(dhi)ge guruv-enisālu salvud-emb-amtutam/ nodidar-acāryyam-badal-madidamn-idane valam Deva-devāṅg-iral-takkud enipp-uttumga-dov-ayatanam-esad-irala dandanatha-Trinetram*

name were two stories that were fused into one as a story of the ruling dynasty associated with the place.

The Making of a Region: Textual Evolution of Embodied Place Name

One of the distinctive features of Puranas and even the regional or *sthala-purāṇas* is that they concern themselves with the myth of origins. This has resulted in the exploration of geography and early ethnography of the earth and its division, the Bharatavarsa or the Indian subcontinent.⁴⁸ Politically, the rule over these territories is devised through multiple myths of descent and lateral relationship—broadly classified in a dependent but opposing binary as the *Sūrya* and *Candra vamśas*—the solar and lunar descents. These quasi-historical genealogies were often used to legitimate the claims of historical dynasties, like as the Calukyas recounted earlier. In this geographical and political exploration, there is a historical conjunction, some kind of synchronicity at some point in time between the two, wherein the region and its rulers are created. The myth of Ailas (the male *Ila* and female *Iḷā*) is significant in order to understand the creation of the Deccan and its subsequent polities.

The early renditions of the story of Ailas may be traced down to the early Vedic and Epic literature from where it was picked and elaborated upon by the authors of Puranas. For instance, in the early story of *Ila*, narrated in the *Uttara-kāṇḍa* or the latter book of the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Valmiki, *Ila* is shown as the son, Kardama, the King of Bahlikas (in present-day Afghanistan), who on a hunting spree happened to be in the charmed forest of Hara and Uma and was transformed into a woman. On realising his gender transformation, he worshipped Siva and Parvati and was granted a gender reversal every month. Alternating between the male *Ila* and female *Iḷā*,⁴⁹ he lived as a bipolar, though each gender state was not remembered and therefore remained hidden from the other. While being *Iḷā*, in the first month, she was impregnated by Budha (planet Mercury, son of Moon) and, nine months later, gave birth to a son, Pururavas. Meanwhile, Kardama found *Ila* and performed a *aśvamedha-yajña* for Hara and Uma, who being happy at his devotion granted his manhood back. *Ila*, the transformed ruler, then constructed a new capital at Pratisthana in the central region, where he was succeeded by Pururavas (VII. 87–89). The choice of Pratisthana is significant as it was the capital of the Satvahanas and a well-known trade centre famous for carnelian, muslin and mallow cloth.

This story was picked up by the earliest Puranas in an altered form. In the *Vāyu*⁵⁰ and *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*,⁵¹ the second being the elaboration of the first, and

⁴⁸ Thapar, 'Genealogical Pattern', pp. 754–81; idem, 'Clans, Caste, and Origin Myths in Early India', pp. 782–96.

⁴⁹ Soar traces *Iḷā* to the Vedic goddess of the priests, who was invoked as a river-goddess, the mother of herd and who offered wealth and progeny, 'The Tirtha at Ellora', p. 81.

⁵⁰ *The Vayu Purana* (hereafter VP).

⁵¹ *The Brahmanda Purana* (hereafter BhP).

composed between the third and fourth centuries CE,⁵² the geography of *Ilāvṛta* region is explored and later the genealogy of Puru (the successor of Pururavas) and his successors, who ruled over this region, is established. According to the *Vāyu Purāṇa*, composed around the third century CE, of the progeny of *svayambhu* Manu (self-proliferating Manu), *Ilāvṛta* was the fourth son of Agnidhara, the ruler of the *Jambudvīpa*—one of the seven divisions of the world (seven continents) (VP I.13: 38–40; BhP I.14: 44). In the division of *Jambudvīpa*, *Ilāvṛta* got the central part of Sumeru (VP)/Mahameru of BhP (VP I.13: 41–45; BhP I.14: 50). That *Ilāvṛta* formed the Deccan is clear from the description of the region: ‘The two sub-continent in the south and north should be known as situated in the form of a bow. Four others are situated lengthwise and the middle one is *Ilāvṛta*’ (VP I.34:32; BhP I.15:35). In the description of the geography of Bharatavarsa (the Indian subcontinent),⁵³ one can recognise the mountain ranges of the Deccan: ‘There are seven great mountain systems with excellent knot-like ridges in this *Varṣa* (subcontinent). They are Mahendra, Malaya, Sahya (Sahyadri of today), Suktiman, Riksaparvata, Vindhya and Pariyatra’ (VP I.45:88). The rivers coming out of this range are: ‘The rivers of the southern land rising from the slopes of Sahya mountains are the Godavari, Bhimarathi, Krisnavaini, Vanjula, Tungabhadra, Suprayoga and Kaveri’ (VP I.45:104). The BhP adds that they flow to the south (BhP I.16). There is a particular description of the Godavari basin and the ethnographic profile of the people of the *Ilāvṛta* region:

Now along the northern half of Sahya mountains where the river Godavari flows is the most delightful region within the whole of this earth (VP I.45: 112; BhP I.16: 43). There is a heavenly city named Govardhana (associated with a village in Nasik district?).⁵⁴ It was built by the king of Devas for Rama’s spouse. Trees and herbs were planted by the sage Bharadvaja for the sake of Rama’s spouse. He made this delightful wooded tract the private part of the palace. (VP I.45: 113–14; 1. BhP I.16: 44–45)

Now the other people who dwell in the southern regions are: Pandyas, Keralas, Caulyas (Colas), Kulyas, Setukas, Musikas, Kumanas, Vanavasikas, Maharastras, Mahisakas, Kalingas, Abhiras, Gaisikas, excellent Atavyas, Pulindras, Vindhyaumulikas, Paunikas, Maunikas, *Asmakas* (the territory of *Ellora*),

⁵² Hazra, *Studies in the Purāṇic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs*; idem, *Studies in the Upapurāṇas*.

⁵³ For the concept of Bharatavarsa and its conceptual implication, Chattopadhyaya, *The Concept of Bharatavarsha and Other Essays*, pp. 1–30.

⁵⁴ The editor of the text informs that this may be identified with a village in Nasik District of Maharashtra. Formerly, it was an important centre of learning, and Brahmanas coming from that area are known as Govardhana Brahmanas. It is mentioned several times in the famous Nasik Inscription of Usasadata (100 B.C.). See *Epigraphia Indica*, VIII p. 78.

*Bhogavardhanas (Ajanta territory), Nairnikas, Kuntalas (South Maharashtra), Andhras, Udbhidas, Nalakalikas. (VP I.45: 124–31)*⁵⁵

Iḷāvṛta region is further celebrated in these early Puranas as a special place. It is a blessed place where people live healthy in a climate that is not harsh. Thus, according to the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* (BhP), in *Iḷāvṛta*, ‘The sun does not blaze very hot there. The men do not become aged. In *Iḷāvṛta*, the moon and the sun as well as the stars are not very bright’ (BhP I.17:10).

The second half of the *Vāyu Purāṇa* also enumerates the story of Puru and his succession to the kingdom of *Iḷāvṛta*. It also recounts the genealogy of the kings who were contemporary to the time of its writing. According to this story, Budha (Mercury), the illegitimate son of Candra and *Tārā*, the abducted wife of Brhaspati (VP II.28: 1–43), begot a son, Aila Pururavas, from princess *Iḷā* (VP II.28: 44–45). His successor Yayati bestowed his kingdom to his youngest son Puru that was in central India (Deccan) (VP II.31). Due to the end of the lineage of Puru’s brother, his successors also inherited southern countries: the Cola, Cera, Kulya and Pandya (VP II.37). Thus, the southern territories were congealed in one dynastic rule of the successors of Puru, like the Calukyas as recounted in their genealogical story narrated earlier.

The story of *Ila* and its association with the territory evolved in the later Puranic texts. For instance, the BhP names the male *Ila* as Sudyaman, perhaps to remove the confusion due to similar names but different sexualities in *Ila* and *Iḷā*. This change of name is again done by bringing in an outside divine intervention. According to the story narrated in BhP, Manu, the progenitor of the humankind, desirous of having a son performed a *yajña* from which *Iḷā* was born (BhP III.60: 2–6). She was, however, blessed by Mitra and Varuna (Sun-god and water-god) who transformed her into a man, as ‘Sudyumna’ (BhP III.60: 10–15). This Sudyumna, as *Iḷā*, bore the son of Budha (BhP III.60: 16–17), but on his return to the kingdom, he was not given a share ‘in the realm’ due to his earlier feminine form. However, at the insistence of his guru, he was installed at Pratisthana (BhP III.60: 21–23). Pratisthana, known as a Petantikas in the fifth rock edict of Asoka, had historical associations going back to the second century BCE and was central to the region and to kingship.⁵⁶

The association of Pratisthana, a prominent trade and political centre, with Sudyumna is interesting as a process. The toponym Pratisthana got associated with a mutated mythic character and became a prominent pilgrim centre, where

⁵⁵ The *Vāyu Purāṇa* continues with further ethnographic elaboration of people of the western coast and Narmada valley: ‘Now hear from me the names of other people: *Surpākaraḥ, Kolavaṇas, Durgās, Kalitakas, Puleyas, Surālas, Rupāsas, Tapasas, Turaśiṭas*, (all the) *Parāksāras, Nāsikyās* and others; those lands in the valley of Narmada, viz. : *Bhānukacchās, Sāmās, Heyās, Sahāsas, Śāsvatas, Kacchiyās, Suraṣṭrās, Anārtas, Arbudas and Sārharitās*’ (VP I.45: 124–31).

⁵⁶ Kane, ‘Ancient Geography and Civilisation of Maharashtra’, pp. 613–57.

people sought absolution from their sins. The *Śiva Purāṇa* mentions Pratisthana as a redemptive centre, where even the ‘wicked’ could attain liberation by listening to the discourse of Siva (SPI.2: 27–28). Later, writing in c. seventh to ninth century CE, the *Skanda Purāṇa*,⁵⁷ the most elaborate of all the Puranas, describes Pratisthana as a place where ‘one gets absolved from the affliction of *piśāca* (demons) during the rites of the month of *Vaiśākha*’ (SkP II.vii. 14: 34, 48). Such was the projected power of this pilgrim centre on the banks of the river Godavari that even a *piśāca*-demon could attain liberation here (SkP IV.ii.54: 25–31).⁵⁸

It is at this point that the two stories, concerning territory and kingship, are reconciled. That is, the story of *Ilā*/Sudyumna and the one associated with *Ilāvṛta* and its rulers are fused into one. The story about the gender transformation of a woman who becomes the ruler of the Deccan also has social and political overtones. The moot point to be considered is why the story of transformation was brought out time and again so elaborately. This is perhaps because of the gendered conception of inheritance and descent in a patriarchal society. Since the girl could not inherit the kingdom and start a royal lineage, the gender transformation was necessitated, a ruse that whetted the sense of miraculous as well as legality.

The story of gender transformation, from man to woman and then vice versa, too evolves over time in the Puranic literature. That the story of this transformation takes place in a forest, away from habitation, is significant. Through the agency of the forest, this story is also associated with Siva and Parvati, who would later become the presiding deities of Ellora. In the BhP, the story is narrated in the context of transformation of Sudyumna into a woman *Ilā*:

Formerly, the eternal bachelors Sanaka and others came to *Ilāvṛta* in order to see Mahesvara. They saw the bull-embalmed lord indulging in amorous sports with Uma in a secluded spot. All of them turned back. Siva then became ashamed. The beloved then said to her lover these words for the sake of her own pleasure: “O lord, the man who enters my hermitage will become a woman. That woman will be splendid and equal to celestial damsels” (BhP III.60: 24–26a). All the living beings there, the *piśācas* and the animals became females. They began to sport along with Rudra like the Apsaras (celestial damsels) (26b–27a). That king Sudyumna, who had been out for hunting entered *Umāvaṇa* (the park of Uma). When Rudra had assumed the state of a woman along with the *piśācas* and *bhūtas* (ghouls and goblins), king Sudyumna too acquired the form of a woman once again. Due to the favour of Mahadeva he regained manhood, (the state of being the son of Manu). (27b–28)

⁵⁷ *The Skanda Purana*, 1950 (hereafter SkP).

⁵⁸ It was, however, not a one-way traffic. The unjust were punished as well. For instance, the sinners or those who did not make *tīrtha-pratigraha* (pilgrim donations) or lived on the pilgrim donations, however, became *piśāca* (IV.ii.54: 25–31).

The *Vāyu Purāṇa*, as also the BhP, then goes on to list the descendants of the lunar and solar races: ‘Aila, Ikṣvaku, Sudyumna and other kings in whom this splendid territory of the Ikṣvaku will be vested (VP II.37: 262–65) ... as well as those of the dynasty of Puru’ (VP II.37: 266). Significantly, in the description of contemporaneous time, both the Puranas describe the historical kings of Deccan as well:

Driving out Kathayanas (Kanvayanas), overpowering Susarmana and making the remaining forces of the Śṛṅgas (? Sungas) dwindle down, Sindhuka of the Andhra race will gain possession of the earth. (VP II.37:342)

Elaborating the mythic genealogy and its linkage with south Indian polity, the VP, as well as other Puranas, states that Dusyanta was the son of Puru, whose grandson Andhira had four sons, ruling over the four realms of peninsular India. They were the Pandya, Kerala, Cola and Kulya—the prominent ruling dynasties of southern India (VP III.74:6). Recounting the contemporary events while using a voice of the future is a common strategy followed in the elaboration of genealogies in Puranic literature: the BhP prognosticates that the Andhras shall succeed the Kanvayanas (BhP III.74:161), of whom mention is made of Gautamiputra, who shall reign for 21 years (BhP III.74:167), followed by Yajna-Sri Satakarni for 19 years, Vijaya 6 years (BhP III.74:168.), whose son Dandasri Satakarni for 3 years and Pulomari (?) shall be the king for 7 years (BhP III.74: 169–70). Thus, the 30 Andhra kings will enjoy the Earth for 456 years, which is counted as 411 years in VP (VP II.37:352). The list is expanded and is more accurate in the chronologically later Puranas, like the *Matsya Purāṇa* (MP-II.273).⁵⁹

The sixth and seventh centuries *Matsya Purāṇa* (MP-I.11;12) recounts the story and goes on to show that *Ilāvṛta* was (became?) an acculturated region, where even gods sought birth:

The vast region known as *Ilāvṛtavarṣa*, where the *yajña* of Bali had been performed, and where Bali was bound, the place was subsequently known as the birth place of the gods. The same *Ilāvṛtavarṣa* [where] the ceremonies of giving [Brahmanical] names and giving away of the daughters in marriage [in Brahmanical rites] had been performed. (MP-I.135: 1–3)

The transformative myth as narrated in BhP is provided a detailed gloss. *Ila* was the eldest of the 10 sons of Manu (MPI.11: 40) to whom he abdicated his empire after attaining old age and desiring to perform austerities in Mahendra mountain (MP I.11: 42). The new emperor, *Ila*, set out on a spree of conquests (MP I.11: 43), and once his horse set foot in the forest (*vaṇa*) of Siva named Sravana, it transformed into a mare, while the king became a woman of ‘immense beauty’ (MPI.11: 44–50). Forgetting her past, *Ilā* was spotted by Budha, who transformed himself into a

⁵⁹ Joshi, *Matsya Mahapurana*. All citations are from this text, cited hereafter as MP; also, Basu, *The Matsya Puranam*; Agrawala, *Matsya Puana—A Study*.

staff-carrying ascetic (*ḍaṇḍi*),⁶⁰ to whom she offered herself and accepted him as her husband (MP I.11: 51–66). In the meantime, the anxious sibling Iksvaku searched for *Ila* and found the transformed mare at the edge of the forest. He came to know about the gender transformation of *Iḷā* through the yogic powers of sage Vasistha (MP I.12: 1–5). He was informed that Uma had cursed the forest as any male entering it would become a woman. Therefore, they should all beseech the help of Siva and Parvati (MP I.12: 6–9). Pleased, Parvati suggested that while she could not take the curse of the place back, she could suggest a remedy, which was that the king would become an androgyne (*kinmar*) if they performed the *asvamedha-yajña* to Siva and Parvati (MP I.12: 10–11). Thus, *Ila* became a *kimpuruṣa*, who was a man and a woman alternatively for a month (MP I.12: 12). It was in this condition, as a woman, that *Iḷā* cohabited with Budha and conceived Pururavas who expanded the lunar dynasty (MP I.12: 13–15). Since then, the *varṣa* or the subcontinent came to be known as *Iḷāvṛta* (MP I.12: 14).

In order to expand and contemporise the above-mentioned association with its human interface, the transformative myth of legendary King Yayati is then recounted. According to this myth, Puru, the youngest son of King Yayati took over his old age. The grateful king later reversed this and rewarded his obedience and selflessness by bestowing his kingdom to Puru (MP I.33; 34). It is this Puru who was claimed as the ancestor of the Kadambas and Calukyās, and the region of Ellora was transformed into a tirtha of *Iḷāvṛta* and the place came to be known as *Elāpurā*, or *Eḷūr* and Ellora.⁶¹

From Region to Place: Construction of the Toponym Ellora

The story of *Ila* is followed in all the Puranas with some variations. The *Skanda Purāṇa* narrates it in a matter of fact way that *Ila* entered the ‘unviolated forest’ and became a woman. He (re)gained his manhood only on worshipping Sonadri (Arunacala) (SKP I.iii.6: 74–77). In the *Liṅga Purāṇa*,⁶² however, the geography is briefly redacted from VP and BhP (in LP I.48), and the story of *Iḷā* reproduced to show how *Ila* was denied the kingdom because of his androgynous state (LP I.16–29) but was installed after the persistence of sage Vasistha at Pratisthana, ‘as its glorious and righteous king...(who became) of great renown’ (LP I.29–32). Significantly, the geographically central realm is given to Sudyumna/*Ila*. This central region, the *Iḷāvṛta*, is conceptualised in the Puranas as the core area from which all ‘other quarters or directions’ (*dik*, or *diśā*) and countries (*deśa*) branch out.⁶³

⁶⁰ Lakulisa was the popular form for the Pasupatas of this time, as also described in *Skanda Purana*, Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*, pp. 152–55.

⁶¹ Soar suggests on the authority of local sources that *Elapura*, consisting of 10 settlements, was established by the eponymous king, Soar, ‘The Tirtha at Ellora’, p. 82.

⁶² Shastri, *The Liṅga Purāṇa* (hereafter LP).

⁶³ This corresponds with the analysis of Chattopadhyaya on geographical locations, *The Concept of Bharatvarsa*, p. 7

The transformative change whereby the place becomes a tirtha and is associated with *Īlā* is, however, brought out conspicuously in the *Brahma Purāṇa* (BrP). In this Purana, *Īlāvṛta* is called the *Īlā-tīrtha*, a place where redemption and salvation can be achieved (BrP I.38: 1). Elaborating the significance of this tirtha, the Purana narrates the story of *Īlā* and gender transformation. The resolution to this androgynous state is, however, brought out through the intervention of the obedient and dutiful son, Pururavas. The text cleverly devises *Īlāvṛta* as a place of dharma that follows the Brahmanical Vedic rituals aimed at the welfare of people. Though the elements of change are added to the story, these changes become critical and would hence go on to become a frame-story for further narrations. References to Sudyumna are dropped. Clearly, the Purana is attempting to resolve the gender transformation that the earlier texts problematised. In the process, a tirtha is established. It also perhaps indicates how the local people (or the buddhists), the protectors of the caves, were acculturated. The BrP succinctly narrates the story:

Once a ruler named *Ila*, born to the family of Vivasvana (Sun), went hunting to the forest with a large army (BrP I.38: 2)...Wandering over the forest ... *Ila* said to his ministers (BrP I.38: 4): that all must go back leaving him alone to look after his kingdom and subjects. He asked even the sage, Vasistha, to go with them to keep the sacrificial fires burning (BrP I.38: 5–7). King *Ila* started roaming in the forest and *came to occupy the caves that were under the protection of Yakṣa* (emphasis added), Samanyu and his wife Sama. The army of *Yakṣas* fought with him and were defeated. So they resorted to a stratagem whereby Sama, disguised as a hind, led *Ila* to the forest of *Umāvaṇa*—the forest of Parvati, or women, whereby any male venturing there became a woman. Consequently, *Ila* became a woman *Īlā* (BrP I.38: 8–57). As an intricate way to get out of the curse, the woman *Īlā* enticed Budha (Mercury), son of Candra-Moon, and got married to him and was a chaste dutiful wife. The union begot a son, the progenitor of the lunar dynasty, Pururavas (Aila, after *Ila* and *Īlā*), who was bright as Sun, intelligent as Brhaspati, lion in battle, angry like fire, and had forbearance like earth. (BrP I.38: 58–81)

However, Pururavas saw his mother anguished and on persistent enquiry came to know (BrP I.38: 82) that she wished to regain her manhood (BrP I.38: 97–98). After deliberation, they sought the refuge of Sambhu and Uma, through the intervention of *Gautamīgangā* (BrP I.38: 101–11). After performing persistent austerities-*tapas* and eulogising Mahesvara, the wish of *Īlā* was granted, after she/he had plunged in the waters of the *Gautamīgangā* (BrP I.38: 111–19). Having transformed again into a man and hence king, he established a new city after his name *Ila*, therefore *Īlā-purī(purā)* (BrP I.38: 124). The Sambhu or the linga worshipped here came to be known as *Ileśvara*. ‘Holy Dip’ and charitable gifts made at this tirtha, the Purana remarked, ‘bestows the benefits of all sacrifices’ (BrP I.38: 129–31).

The story provides interesting insights. First, the caves were there before the Puranas conjured the *Ilā* story. They were protected by the *Yakṣas*. Second, the *Yakṣas* were associated with the goddess. Third, only the propitiation of the goddess could reverse the androgynous curse and allow for the establishment of the 'place'. Thus, according to the BrP, the toponym *Ilā-puri*, or the *Elāpurā* of the Rastrakutas, was given to the newly formed place that housed the icon of Siva worshipped as *Ileśvara*. In the process, the distinction between the region, *Ilāvṛta*, and the place, *Ilāpuri*, is clearly brought out. *Elāpuri* or Ellora became the place that housed the abode of Siva, Kailasa, sanctified by the linga *Ileśvara*. This embodied space, *Elāpuri*, became the new place constructed by the Calukyas by the side of the Buddhist caves (the *Yakṣas*' caves?), who drew their descent from Puru, the successors of *Ilā*, and were succeeded by their feudatories, the Rastrakutas, during whose reign the temple of Kailasanath was completed.

While the Puranas were being written, Buddhism was also changing structurally and ritually, particularly with the ever-increasing Tantric elements coming to dominate the sculptural narrative. This was also evident in Ellora caves, as well as in Buddhist praxis. During this time, particularly after the eighth century CE, in many regions, including the Deccan, Buddhism was competing for patronage with Brahmanism and was slowly being edged out where Saivism, particularly the Pasupatas, entrenched themselves in a big way.⁶⁴ Against this political backdrop, it is interesting to note that the Puranas, written between the third and tenth centuries CE and responsible for the spread of Saiva dominance in this region, largely ignored Buddha and Buddhists. Only while casting genealogy is the name of Buddha sometimes associated with Magadha, as in VP and BhP, or sometimes mentioned as the ninth incarnation of Visnu. The Buddhist deities were also appropriated within the widening Hindu pantheon, their names were also Sanskritised, for instance, at Ellora. Although relatively few, the references to Buddhism are significant in the context of the political developments of the time. For instance, *Skanda Purāna* writes about the goddess *Tārā*, who was also a significant Buddhist deity in the early Mahayana/Vajrayana tradition that:

Tārā was installed by me (Siva) in the South, for the sake of the redemption of the Devas, as she has resorted to Kurma (incarnation of Tortoise). Permeated by her, Kurma, the sire of the universe, lifted up the Vedas. With his body possessed by her, Budha (Mercury) will kill the Baudhdhas (Buddhists) in crores (millions), the sinners who destroyed the Vedic path. She is the daughter of the Mountain. She has been brought by me after due propitiation (SkP I.ii.47: 12–15). She is surrounded by crores of very fierce goddesses. With due deference to me, she has resorted to the southern quarter and stationed herself. (SkP I.ii.47: 16–17)

In the *Skanda Purāna*, the ambiguous *Tārā*, who once eloped with Candra and sits at the root of the lunar dynasty, worshipped by the Buddhist as well as Hindus,

⁶⁴ Soar, 'The Tirtha at Ellora', pp. 93–95.

Figure 3. *Tārā* in Cave-IV, Ellora. Photo Acc No. 43261 (Neg No 377.100)



Source: American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi.

is ‘planted’ as the saviour of the Brahmanical social order. She beseeches the Kurma-tortoise (the incarnation of Visnu) that holds and balances the earth to save the Brahmanical world from destruction. That the text is referring to this region may be inferred from the fact that *Tārā* is seen as the same as the mythical *Ilā*. *Tārā* thereafter becomes the deity of the southern quarter, the direction of death and dead. In practice, however, *Tārā* continued to be invoked by seafarers and was worshipped by the Hindus and Jainas, apart from the Buddhists as is evident from the inscription of the Calukya King Tribhuvanamalla or Vikramaditya VI during 1076–26 CE.⁶⁵ The language during the period from seventh-

⁶⁵ Sen Gupta, ‘A Sculptural Representation of the Buddhist Litany to Tara at Ellora’, p. 14.

ninth-century SkP is a reminder of a familiar strategy whereby Buddhist deities were merged into or replaced by the Pasupata Saivas, who became dominant in the region of *Ilāvṛta* and, particularly, in *Elāpuri*, Ellora. As we shall also note in the later section in the Mackenzie manuscript detailing the nomenclature of the caves, the Buddhist caves subsequently came to be known as Hindu caves, the Buddhist deities refashioned as Hindu deities.⁶⁶ The cult of *Tārā* (see Figure 3) and other goddesses, Mahamayuri or Bhṛkūti, facilitated this transformation as the cult and its practices approximated Hindu forms, particularly in the early medieval Deccan, where the cult of *sapta-matrkas* (seven mother-goddesses) was already prominent. In a way, the strategy described in SkP, of placing *Tārā* as a deity transcending the porous religious boundaries, and as the embodiment of space and place (of *Ilā*), is a reflection of the socio-religious changes that were taking shape between the seventh and ninth centuries.⁶⁷ The vitriolic pronouncements against the Buddhist practitioners, particularly the Vajrayana sectarians, are indicative of the political shift that finds pronounced elaboration in the eventual dominance of Brahmanism in Ellora.

Observations of Islamic Chroniclers

The first impressions from non-Brahmanical world about Ellora come from al-Mas‘udi, a resident of Baghdad, who visited Ellora in the 970s CE. In his account, *The Golden Prairies*, Mas‘udi talks of a grand temple that has the ‘entire city as its foundation’. He observed that the Indians from far off places made pilgrimages to Ellora. The numerous ‘consecrated adorers (of the deity)’, perhaps Siva in Kailasa Temple, lived in ‘a thousand cells’, an obvious reference to the caves during the course of their pilgrimage.⁶⁸ Since Buddhism was receding and the number of monks who visited these caves from Sri Lanka and other regions had diminished long back, it seems that their caves were already being used as temporary residences by pilgrims as well as service providers. As becomes evident in

⁶⁶ The earliest colonial administrative writers—Mallet, ‘Description of the Caves’, Sykes, ‘Account of the Caves of Ellora’; Elliot, *Views in the East*—point to such a nomenclature, where Buddhist caves, barring Caves 1–5, had Hindu names like *Viśvakarmā* cave, etc.

⁶⁷ Davidson hypothesises how there was a decline in patronage for Buddhism around this time, and that there was a change of trajectory within Buddhism in which the integration of the *Puranic*, particularly the Pasupata element were critical for new Buddhisms as well as to *Purānic* Hinduism. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*. This is also evident in the integration of Saiva iconography particularly in the image of Avilokitesvara and goddesses.

⁶⁸ Maçoudi, *Les Prairies d’Or (The Golden Prairies)*, Vol. 4, pp. 95–96: “le grand temple nomme Aladra (Ellora?) ou les Indiens se rendent en pelerinage des regions les plus eloignees. Ce temple a une ville entiere a titre de fondation pieuse, et il est entoure de mille cellules ou vivent les envois qui se consacrent a l’adoration particuliere de cette idole) (the great temple called Aladra (Ellora?) where Indians go on pilgrimage from the most distant regions. This temple has an entire city as a pious foundation, and it is surrounded by a thousand cells in which live the travellers dedicated to the special worship of this idol)”.

later centuries, the context of pilgrimage slowly changed the nature of these caves from Buddhist to Hindu.⁶⁹

The Persian and Arabic chronicles were not much interested in describing Ellora, though stray references every now and then suggest that it was a much visited place of leisure or a rendezvous. Unlike other sacred places, Ellora was not an active religious centre, except perhaps during the rainy season or the occasional pilgrimage. Perhaps this was a contributory reason for not inviting the wrath of desecration and demolition as did some other sacred centres. In fact, it was a place where people could meet, a place that inspired the idea of an alternative political order in the mind of both Muslim chroniclers and perhaps the rulers as well. This was the place that could provide a romantic backdrop to the past without undue engagement with facts. In this context, the most interesting such reflection on the past is a 1307 CE tale revisited by Firishta in the early seventeenth century. This is a tale of a certain Gujarat princess Deval Devi Rani, whose mother was earlier inducted by 'Ala al-Din into his harem. Deval Rani's mother had apparently wielded some influence with 'Ala al-Din when, according to Firishta, he asked the Governor of Gujarat, Alp Khan, to secure Deval Rani for him. Deval Rani fled with her fiancé, Karan Rai. The fugitives were accidentally found at Ellora, when the troops had gone to see the caves. She was captured and sent to Delhi. Unfortunately, Deval Rani could not find love in Delhi as well and died as a destitute. Barani, the fourteenth-century Sultanate historian, partially corroborates this incident, without any mention of the Ellora escapade. He mentions that Karan Rai of Gujarat fled from Nahrwala and went to Ram Deo of Deogir. 'The wives and daughters, the treasure and elephants of Rai Karan, fell into the hands of the Muhammadans'.⁷⁰ Again, Amir Khusrau, another contemporary, writes '*Ashika* (Love legend) about Deval Rani and her flight from Gujarat and abduction from Deogir and how she died destitute in Delhi'.⁷¹ In all contemporary accounts, Ellora is missing, perhaps a romantic backdrop later insinuated by Firishta.

While there is no description of Ellora, its fame was widespread. Firishta records that Alp Khan's army, having lost the trail of Deval Devi, was camping at a nearby place. 'While halting, for two days, to refresh his army among the mountains, some of his troops, to the number of 300, went without leave to see the caves of Elloora, in the neighbourhood of Dewgur, from which city his camp was not far distant'.⁷²

⁶⁹ There is a variant reading of this passage: See Ernst, 'Admiring the Works of the Ancients', p. 173: 'the temples (*hayākil*) in India dedicated to idols (*aṣṇām*) in the form of Buddhas (*bidada*), which have appeared since ancient times in the land of India, and information about the great temple which is in India, known as Ellora; this is an object of pilgrimage (*yuqṣadu*) from far distances in India. It has a land endowment and around it are a thousand cells, where monks supervise the worship (*ta'zīm*) of this idol in India'.

⁷⁰ Barani, *Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi*, Vol. III, p. 163.

⁷¹ Amir, *Ashika*, Vol. III, pp. 551–52.

⁷² Firishta, *Tarikh-i Firishta*, Vol. 1, p. 368.

The fact that the troops could not resist the visit to Ellora is a pointer to its wide fame as an architectural marvel and not as an active religious centre, which might have elicited a different response from the Sultanate army.

In further references, Ellora is again mentioned by Firishta as a place to relax. For instance, Ahmad Nizam Shah, who was tired after his Gujarat campaign in 1499 CE, took shelter at Ellora ‘and relaxed (there) from his cares in a variety of amusements’.⁷³ He again mentions one Mukammal Khan, a Nizam Shahi official, who was camping for a while in Daulatabad, visited ‘on a party of pleasure to see the caves of Elloora in its vicinity’.⁷⁴ Even the open area around Ellora seemed to welcome hostile armies; they could camp there, just like the Rastrakuta armies in 742 CE, while their king conferred with the ruler of Gujarat. Similarly, Firishta informs us that during the rule of Ibrahim Quli Qutb Shah, some hostilities took place in 1589 near Ellora. One of the contending ‘force(s) encamped at *Verool* (sic), a place situated among the hills, and famous on account of its caverns, on which spot he was attacked...’.⁷⁵ While writing about the encampment, Firishta also informs that the name Ellora of the village had changed to *Verool*, a name that he had not used in his earlier descriptions of 1499 and 1510 CE. In subsequent documents of the Marathas, of the Nizām, and later the Bhonsale princely state of Akkalkot, the name of the place is *Verūḷa/Verool/Yerool*, even though the colonial writers used *Eḷūr* and therefore Ellora, just like the Puraṇic *Elāpuri*.⁷⁶

Why was the name changed in the mid-sixteenth century? Was it because of local politics between the Bijapur and Golconda kingdoms? Or, is it because Firishta, in writing about contemporary times, used the locally prevalent toponym, while he used *Eḷūr* earlier for the time in the past—the received history, so to say. Although we may lack confirmation on this question, one way or the other, evidently toponymic change seems to have had little bearing on the culture, identity or community of the village of Ellora/*Verūḷa*.

The fame of Ellora was sufficiently widespread that even the reputedly puritanical Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb spent the last 25 years of his life in the nearby town of Aurangabad while campaigning in the Deccan. Known as a devout Muslim and an iconoclast, Aurangzeb’s observations on Ellora require pause and consideration. He visited the caves in c. 1683 and was amazed by the scale, the scope, the figuration and the setting of these caves. He found them to be unparalleled works of wonder beyond human creative skills. Like al-Mas‘udi, he also noted that pilgrims visited the caves in the rainy season—the season auspicious for the worship of Siva. But he also observed their desolation, reinforcing the premise that they were not an

⁷³ *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 203.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 472.

⁷⁶ Kolahpur Residency in the Deccan States Agency, No. 26, Claim of the Raja of Akalkot to the Patilki Watan of the village of Verul, in the Aurangabad district of HH the Nizam’s dominions. No. 75 of 1883–84, British Library, London.

active religious centre throughout the year. In its desolation, however, the philosophical Aurangzeb ominously saw the signs of temporal transience, a foreboding of the hand of fickle destiny evident in the decay of a once dominant and cultured civilisation even though it be infidel and sinful⁷⁷:

A short distance from here [Aurangabad] is a place named Ellora where in ages long past, sappers possessed of magical skill excavated in the defiles of the mountain spacious houses for a length of one kos. On all their ceilings and walls many kinds of images with lifelike forms have been carved. The top of the hill looks level, so much so that no sign of the buildings within it is apparent (from outside). In ancient times when the sinful infidels had dominion over this country, certainly they and not demons (jinn) were the builders of these caves, although tradition differs on the point, it was a place of worship of the tribe of false believers. At present it is desolation in spite of its strong foundations, it rouses the sense of warning (of doom) to those who contemplate the future (end of things). In all seasons, and particularly in the monsoons, when this hill and the plain below resemble a garden in the luxuriance of its vegetation and the abundance of its water, people come to see the place. A waterfall a hundred yards in width tumbles down from the hill. It is a marvellous place for strolling, charming to the eye. Unless one sees it, no written description can picture it. How then can my pen adorn the page of my narrative?

The idea of visualising Ellora as a political trope by the seventeenth-century Arabic-Persian chroniclers in India has been emphasised by Carl Ernst as well. Using an imaginative text on the making of Ellora, which is informed by the author's idea of the functioning of Mughal *kārkhāna* or artisanal workshops, Ernst introduces a 1612 text, *Tadhkirāt al-mulūk* (Memorial of kings), a Persian history of Bijapur written by Rafi al-Din Shirazi.⁷⁸ Ellora is only discussed in an Appendix: 'On Wonders and Rarities (pp. 497–566)'.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Ernst points out that this does not mean that it is marginal to the world view being constructed by the author. The questions that the author was confronted with was the idea of Ellora in the political situation of Deccan, in the expanding world of the Mughal empire, and grappling with a past that was not Islamic. How was a mountain quarried and sculpted to build such a wonder? The question was also to accept and reconcile with or dismiss a sacred place, aesthetically appealing, but full of blasphemous icons, which would be a heresy to Islam. These questions assume significance since Shirazi (as Ernst has pointed out) was of conservative views and critical of Akbar's liberal disposition.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Khan, *Ma'asir-i-Ālamgīrī*, pp. 145–46. Also cited by Ernst, 'Admiring the Works of the Ancients', pp. 161–85.

⁷⁸ Ernst, 'Admiring the Works of the Ancients', pp. 161–85.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

Shirazi takes us to a mythical ruler Parchand Rao, the Emperor of India 4,000 years ago, who ruled over ‘the land from the border of Sind, Gujarat, the Deccan, and Telingana to the limit of Malabar (the Calukyan/ Rastrakuta territory?), and most of the neighbouring kings were his subjects’. He was just and fair, and his subjects were happy and content. Daulatabad was the capital of Prachand Rao, a city that was the centre of the world, which produced elegant fabrics, where all the merchants and traders congregated, a place with rich citizenry—both Hindus and Muslims.⁸¹ Seeking immortality in monumental architecture, the king called all engineers, architects and stoneworkers to build something ‘that will be truly permanent, so that it will be spoken of for years afterward, and there should be wonders and rarities in it so that it will endure and remain lasting for long years and uncounted centuries, and its construction will be famed and well known throughout the world’.⁸² They conferred among themselves and proposed to the king, what looked like a description of the courtyard of Kailasa Temple. However, as Ernst points out, through their voice, Shirazi was projecting into the past the system and regulation of workshops as they were supervised and worked in the kingdom of Bijapur.⁸³

Shirazi interlinks Ellora with Kailasa, which is transformed into a palace in this political imaginary, surrounded by many palaces each provisioned in a unique way. He speculates how the temple/palace was hewed out of the mountain with an open space around it and comments on the subtlety of workmanship, the placement of animals and army, again projecting the courtly life of Bijapur into Ellora:

Beginning from the middle of the mountain, they made a great open space in the palace, which they call the retreat (*khilwatkhāna*). On all four sides of the open space, they cut open spaces (*sar-sāya*, lit. ‘shades’) in the stone, perfect in height, width, and length, with a polished and proportioned foundation. In most places these are carved in the fashion of great arches (*tāq*) needing no pillars. The carving is extremely even and polished, or rather, is even given a lustre. In some of these open spaces there are alcoves ... with caves. Their ability reaches such subtlety that if the master artist wished to paint one with a brush made from a single hair, nowhere would it be easy for him [to match their skill]. ... On the courtyard in front of the palace gate, here and there several large and small elephants are standing in order. Around each elephant a few attendants stand in their regalia.⁸⁴

Shirazi conceives hundreds of people moving around, the army standing, exhibiting various weapons, such as swords, daggers, dirks (Hindi *kat-āra*), spears, bows, quivers

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 164–65.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 166–67.

and arrows. Inside the courtyard are porticos, with ‘rooms carved and hollowed out’. Shirazi compliments the skill of the Ellora workers for their perfection: ‘The skill of each workshop is cut into rock to such a degree that the human mind cannot imagine it. Everyone who goes there says that the people [in the stone reliefs] are having a party. One should spend several days at the palace if one wishes to see them all, and to understand them fully a long lifetime would be needed’.⁸⁵

As his political model suggested, Shirazi conceived a fort behind the palace, which was as intricate and wondrous as the palace. There, in the cells of these caves, he conceived the setting up of artisanal workshops.⁸⁶ Inside the palace, projecting the sanctum of the temple into Bijapur court, the centrality is given to the Emperor/Siva, seated on an ‘imperial throne’. The court or sanctum is depicted colourfully, with its regalia, hierarchy, etiquettes and ‘the chief-musicians (*sar-i nawbatān*) and the court prefect (*shihna-i dīvān*) stand[ing] in the proper arrangement and position in their places...Several famous and large elephants, which were always the apple of the emperor’s alchemical eye, are in his presence, and several head of elite imperial horses, which were always present with the court drum, are present in the customary fashion’.⁸⁷

Ernst draws our attention to the fact that Shirazi was, indeed, influenced in his description of Ellora by a similar neighbourhood in Shiraz, a region called ‘Naqsh-i Rustam and The Forty Towers’.⁸⁸ In a way, the model for Ellora lies in Persepolis of pre-Islamic Persia, or Pharaonic Egypt, 4,000 years in the past. He cannot appreciate Ellora in terms of religious aesthetics but can appreciate it within a courtly context, projecting political and economic influence. Shirazi, therefore, does not talk about religion, nor does he moralise. He rather appreciates it aesthetically and understands it politically. For him, as Ernst points out, Ellora is a depiction of the courtly life of early India, and therefore the centrality of Kailasa is the centrality of the emperor’s court, where Siva, the chief deity, is the emperor. In Siva of Kailasa, he sees the principle of sovereignty and rule-ship in early India upheld allegorically in the mythical Emperor Parchand Rao—literally the ‘Intense’ king.

Local Histories: *Sthala Purāṇa* in the MacKenzie Collection

The Mackenzie manuscript (Mms) in the British Library, London, is allegedly based on the existing *Sthala-Purāṇa* of this region (*mahātmya*) in Marathi language along with the stories that were collected from the local Brahmanas of Daulatabad. The manuscript was written in 1806 and may be divided into two parts.⁸⁹ One, the

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 167–68.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 168–69.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 170–71.

⁸⁹ Brahmin, ‘Memoir Descriptive of the Ancient Place of Ellora’, pp. 76–89. References are to the folios marked in the manuscript (handwritten; microfilm, India Office Library).

making of Saivite tirtha or the pilgrim centre and, two, the Ellora caves with a focus on the Brahmanical cave and Kailasanath temple. The Buddhist past is marginal to the exercise, though not totally obliterated as in Puranic literature. While the mythical past is sourced from the Puranas, the period of Muslim Padshahi is regarded as destructive to the caves.

The first part establishes this text as the *Mahātmya* of *Yella-nadi* or *Sivanāda* and the tirtha, *Griṣṇeśvara*, on its banks. Drawing upon the uncorroborated authority of the *Skanda Purāṇa*, *Griṣṇeśvara* is established as one of the 12 Jyotirlingas in the Indian subcontinent. The Sahyadri mountains are to its north-east, and the tirtha is the place where Parvati worshipped Mahadeva, while she performed *tapas*—austerities—on the mount that became a cursed mountain for men. The story in the Purana is then repeated: King *Yella* climbed the mountain on his horse. The horse died while the king climbed on, asking his army to wait for him. Having become a woman, he asked his army to go back to Hastinapur. Since Mahadeva too could not enter the mountain, he went to Kailasa, which too was cursed as the place where only men could enter. Thus, there was no meeting point for the god and goddess to meet. River Ganga then acted as the intermediary between the two. She prayed and beseeched Parvati to return to Mahadeva (Mms: folio 6); that the ‘husbands are the Chief, they are supreme Guroos (sic) to the wife’ (Mms: folio 7). Parvati then relented.

While the Puranic gloss is used to establish the name after *Yella (Ila)*, *Yelūr* and the sanctity of the place as Saivite centre, the tirtha is legitimated by devising a new myth, whereby Parvati also relented because she dreamed of Yama, the god of death, entering the sacred tirtha from the western bank from where all the waters ran into the sea. Interestingly, this would be the Buddhist side of the waterfall. All the people living there were helpless, and the tirtha was deserted. Then she saw Indra telling Yama of the sin he had committed from which he could only escape by bathing in the sacred pool or whatever remains of it. After bathing there and released from his sins, Yama placed a Sivalinga there. This is to the south of *Griṣṇeśvara* and became a prominent place to worship (Mms: folios 7–8).

Parvati also relented because due to her curse, the tigers in the jungle had grown, the other wildlife were fast vanishing and the Brahmanas had fled. If the king were to be released from his curse, he would settle the city anew, rebuild the tirtha and settle the population to restore the worship of Mahadeva of ‘Seevastan Nuggar’ (sic). Parvati had to coax *Yella Raja* to regain his manhood by reminding him that women must always remain in the protection of their husbands and then serve as mothers to their children. Females were supposed to conceive and bear birthing pain. If a woman ‘gave birth to a son, the earth too becomes happy and rises six inches’ for he shall bring happiness and pleasure by his charities. But if a girl is born, ‘the earth shall descend over *veete* (twelve inches) because a virgin is sinful; and therefore the condition of a female is evil’ (Mms: folio 8).

Hearing this, and reminded of his duty, *Yella Raja* then bathed in the transformative pool of ‘Awoodumber’ (sic) and became a man. Tears of joy welled up in

Parvati's eyes and from the east of the caves emerged a river, *Girīgangā*, and from those from the other eye formed the river *Yeḷlagangā*. *Yeḷlagangā* has many tirthas on its banks, including the pool of *Griṣṇeśvara*, which irrigates 15 kos of villages before merging with Sivanadi. *Yeḷla Raja*, in turn, prayed to Ganga and Godavari rivers, who asked him to restore again the glory of tirtha desecrated by Yama. He then proceeded on the tirthas situated on the banks of *Yeḷlagangā*. These are the various ponds, such as Brahma-kunda, Sakti-kunda and Matru-kunda—where people make a wish for progeny, and if the water falling from the hill falls on the couple's head, a male child is granted. Further, the glory of the tirtha is recounted in its miraculous stories, healing capacity and religious merits. For instance, a story of one Raja Sankarsana, the lord of Drisdavati, is narrated, who was afflicted by leprosy. He bathed in the Dara tirtha on *Yeḷla*-river and was cured (Mms: folio 9).

When *Raja Yeḷla* returned, people felicitated him and gave him expensive gifts. He then repaired the sacred pool of Sivalaya and later named the place Ellora or Ellora. Then Uma sent Ganga as her emissary to Mahadeva and asked him to come to Ellora where she shall wait for him. In the meantime, Parvati came to Ellora and stayed at the house of *Raja Yeḷla*. Mahadeva arrived and was counselled by Brahma that he should reconcile with Parvati to which Mahadeva agreed and ordered Visvakarma, the deity of artisans, to make mount Kailasa a suitable residence for him and also a place to perform his marriage, as well as carve out Indra-sabha, Bhuloka, Mrityu-loka, Patala, Svarga and Dhimalaya—the major Brahmanical caves of Ellora complex (Mms: folio 10). *Raja Yeḷla* lived for a long time and worshipped at Kailasa and at *Cakreśvara*, a temple to the south-west of *Griṣṇeśvara*. He also worshipped Ganapati, called Lutca-Vinayaka, as well as Naga-jiri or the spring of snake-god, which flows down into *Yeḷlagangā*. Finally, leaving the kingdom to his son and heir Makranda, *Yeḷla* joined the Sivaloka (Mms: folio 13).

It would be useful to assess the tradition of 12 *Jyotirlingas* (the eternally illuminated icons), the last one being *Ghuṣmeśvara*, as recounted in the *Śiva Purāṇa* (SP III. 42: 2–4),⁹⁰ and to note the extent to which it departs from the story of *Griṣṇeśvara* as it was narrated earlier in the *Verūḷa Mahātmya*. This form of Siva is the form of indulgence in which Siva 'conferred bliss on *Ghuṣmā*' (SP III. 42:52). Siva manifested himself in a lake near Devasaila (a mountain in the Godavari region, associated with Ellora mountain) and was pleased with the devotion of *Ghuṣmā* so much so that he revived her son who had been killed by Sudehya (the step-mother) (SP III. 53–54). As a boon to the devotees, he thereafter stayed in the form of Jyotirlinga *Ghuṣmeśvara* (SP III. 55).⁹¹

⁹⁰ *The Śiva Purāṇa*.

⁹¹ Soar remarks that probably linga was worshipped by women and not Brahmana men, who offered daily fire rituals. Further evidence is provided by examples of goddesses who made linga to be worshipped by the lakes, as also in the myth of *Ghuṣmeśvara/Griṣṇeśvara* Jyotirlinga, 'The Tirtha at Ellora', pp. 95–96.

The first part of the Mackenzie manuscript is devoted to the construction of a Saivite sacred geography and how the prominent caves, the Kailasanath, were created in imitation of the abode of Siva, Mount Kailasa, and his world and how the domestication of other caves carved the Puranic narratives—from marriage of Siva, to the mother-goddesses or *sapta-mātrkas*, the legends of epics, etc. The Buddhist world is briefly discussed towards the end, but little effort is made to ground it historically. The *caitya*, or cave 10, is associated with Visvakarma—the maker of the world and these caves—and the Buddha in this or other Buddhist caves is not recognised or discussed (see Figure 4). Rather, the images in caves 1–5 are called the ‘images of *dhedes*’ (the deities of untouchable), in as much these caves are considered out of bounds for the pilgrims, these being the impure spaces of

Figure 4. Buddha as *Viśvakarmā* in Cave-X—called *Viśvakarmā’s* cave. See the Painted Eyes, *Tilak*-Mark on Forehead, and Lime-painted Stupa. J. Johnson (1860) in British Library (BL-0190PHO-001400)



Source: Part of the Allardyce Collection, India Office Collection, British Library Board, London.

Figure 5. 'Dherwada', Buddhist Caves-I-V, Ellora. Spink (1966, Acc No. 97597 [Neg No. 905-66])



Source: American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi.

the untouchables. Since the Buddhist monks had since long stopped visiting, the puja was offered by the *Cuhrā* priests, or the priests of the scavenging castes, the pariah in the Hindu caste structure (see Figure 5). The Ellora complex therefore mirrored social reality: the southern caves, also the direction of death, were the domain of the untouchables and the northern, including northernmost Jaina caves, were associated with the Brahmanical deities.

If the Buddhist past is that of the marginalised, the untouchables, and therefore obliterated from a larger consciousness, and the caves 1–5 made out of bound, the other Buddhist caves (6–12XII), with discernible goddess motifs were Hinduised. The sculptures were moreover painted, altering, therefore, the perception of the images and making them accessible to the sensibilities of Hindu worshippers.⁹² While the Muslims (Afghans, Turks, Mughals) or 'the rule of the Padashah' had no bearing on the making of the caves, their rule since the occupation of Daulatabad in the early fourteenth century was considered disruptive and destructive. It is not a coincidence that of all the rulers, it is Aurangzeb's visit that is thus described. While

⁹² Also noted among others, for instance, Captain Sykes points out in 1821 in his 'An Account of the Caves of Ellora', pp. 314–22.

the manuscript takes pride in the act of the painting of images, it describes temple desecration in a novel way—by burning, a metaphor of death in the Hindu world:

The king Dandaka Raja caused all the places from Indra sabha to Pataal loka to Dhoomalayaa, to be painted on both the sides and all the figures sculpted on the muntapham on the mountain...when Aurangzeb Padshah came here cunnatts [sic; tents] were put up in the muntapam [courtyards]. He is said to have resided here sometime — at that time he caused the muntapam to be filled up with straw — which was set on fire; this was done on the persuasion of some Mohamadans to make trial of the virtue of the place. In consequence all the paintings were destroyed and the carvings greatly damaged....(sic; Mms: folio 23–24)

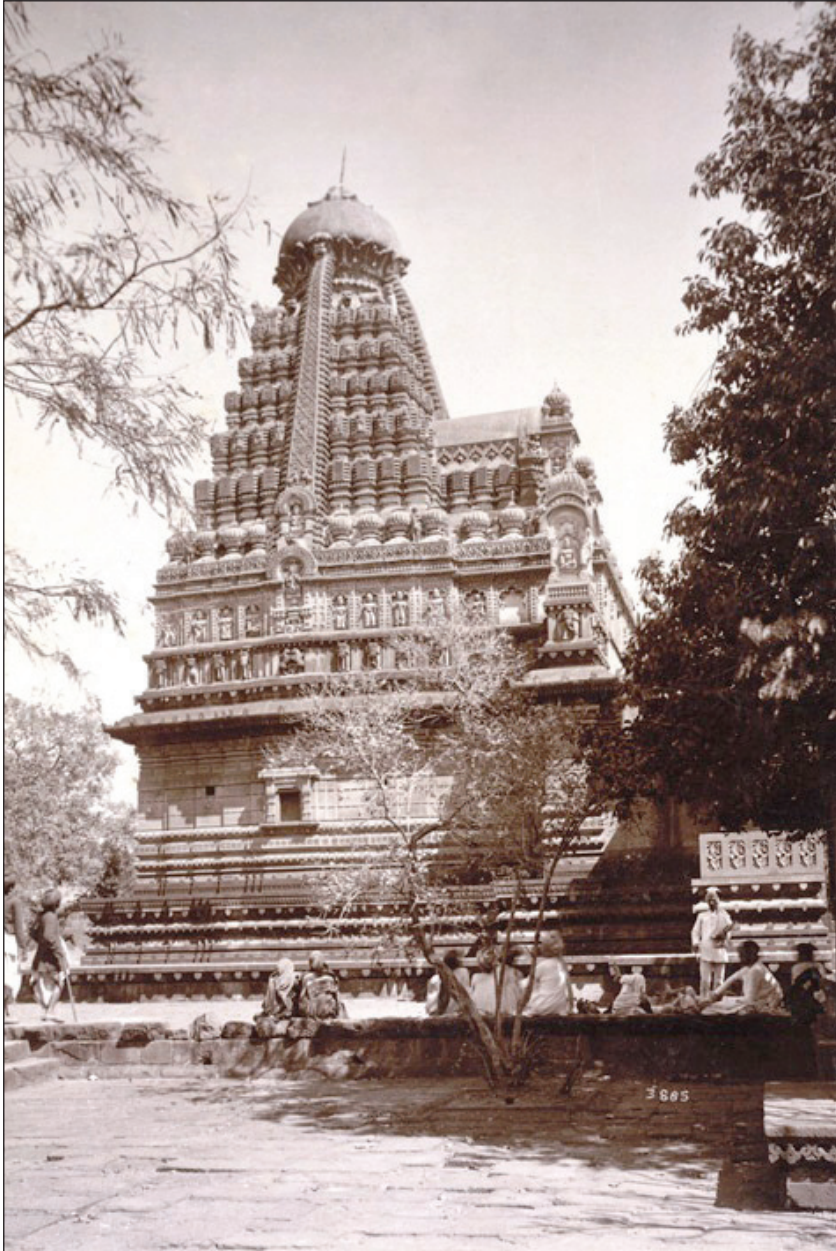
Yet the caves survived. The manuscript then launches into a counter-narrative of the power of place, wherein the power of the ‘sacred’ is greater than the ‘temporal’, something which the mortal ruler had to eventually recognise. The counter-narrative humbles and civilises the emperor:

...when Raja Aurangzeb was in the Kailasghurry (sic) he caused all the muntapam to be filled up with straw which was set on fire. In the following night Mahadeo appeared to him in a dream and struck him, and the next morning the news arrived of the sudden death of the wife of the son of Aurangzeb and his favourite riding horse; then Aurangzeb was convinced that this was a holy place. There being no large gate to the mountain of Kylas Ghery (sic—Kailasa Temple) at that time. Aurangzeb Padshah expended a considerable sum in building the Mahadwaar or great gate to Kylas Ghery; and without the gate he built three domes wherein his wife and son⁹³ were buried and from that period he gave no more trouble to this place. (Mms: folio 30)

In these texts, the Muslim rulers, both the Mughals and the Nizamshahis—who ruled from Hyderabad—were depicted in a similar way. The Nizamshahis were contemporaneous to the production of the manuscript and were depicted slightly more discreetly as neglectful and callous to the religious affairs of the Hindus. The manuscript noted that Ellora village which once ‘had 1,000 houses of Brahmins, sahuikars, merchants who spent annually twenty to thirty thousand’—was neglected. ‘It was never fortified and now remains only the broken walls’ to the north and south. ‘Two gates put up but the village might be rendered insecure. About three years ago the Holkars plundered it, then the Bhils again plundered it... [and] ... ‘the Brahmins being greatly disrespected by the thieves went to live in the fort of Daulatabad...The *abhishekam* or the lamps to Griseswara are only lit to whom the travellers come and they light the lamps. All allowances [are] stopped by the

⁹³ The text originally mentions the death of Aurangzeb’s son’s wife and his favourite horse. A couple of lines later, the king is also described burying his son.

Figure 6. *Griṣṇeśvara* Temple (called Ahilya Bai's Temple) at Ellora village. Raja Deen Dayal, 1880s.



Source: India Office Collection, British Library Board, London.

sircar and no one go[es] to worship in the mount which is infested by the thieves, who live there...’ (sic; Mms: folio 37–38) (see Figure 6).

The manuscript, however, takes pain to inscribe two names of significance in the context of the making of the sacred centre of *Griṣṇeśvara* and the politics that shaped the region:

West of the temple are two domes. It is written that the Maalojee Raja, who was a Patil then under Padshah, sat on the north east of Greesneswar calling on the name of Seevo and departed his life. Over him was built the dome and second tomb was built in Jhakum 1414 Saka (1492 CE) for Shahjee Bhosala. The ground was purchased from the Brahmins and two tombs were erected when they died....Afterward Aheelia Bae the wife of Khanderao Holkar repaired the Seevalaya Teert, built steps to it and repaired the pagoda of Greesneswar in 1692 Saka (1780 CE) in an inscription on the banks of Seevaliṅga teert. (sic; Mms: folio 37)

This insertion is significant and pregnant with meanings. Even though the chronology is way off the mark, we know that Maloji Bhonsale was the Patil of *Verūla* in late sixteenth century. He renovated (perhaps built?) the *Griṣṇeśvara* temple on a land purchased from Brahmanas,⁹⁴ and he died at Indapur, battling against the Bijapur Sultanate. His son Shahaji, who served the Mughal emperor briefly before joining the services of Bijapur against them, died at Hodigere in Karnataka in 1664. His son and successor, Shivaji carved a kingdom that lasted from 1674 to 1818, a realm in whose service were associated the two dynasts, Bhonsale and Holkar. Through these names, the text invoked a larger Marathi identity that was associated with the region in which the locality of *Verūla* was situated. The recollection of particular protagonists is carefully configured. Ahilya Bai, the wife of the Khanderao Holkar (r. 1767–95), is invoked as a patron of Hindu temples: she built the steps to the ‘Seevalaya Teert’ and repaired ‘Greesneswar’. As it happens, she is also well known and widely respected as the patron of the temples in Dvarka and the Visvanatha temple in Varanasi, an association that invests the place with a new meaning within a hierarchy of religious sites demarcating an eighteenth-century Hinduism.

Conclusion: Issues of Texts, Textuality and Politics of the Place

The shifting religious political space of Ellora is constructed over the *longue durée*, using four distinct literary sources—the epigraphic records, Puranas, Arabic and Persian chronicles, and the Mackenzie manuscript—each a product of specific time

⁹⁴ Sohani, ‘Continuities in the Sacred Landscape’, pp. 160–61, evaluates Marathi sources and farmans to suggest that the temple of *Griṣṇeśvara* only came up after the land-settlement of the Bhonsale family, and the temple was built by him according to the document of 1604 CE. See Sohani, p. 159. There are two tombs, which are not Islamic, and are known as *chhatris*, which are emblematic of the Maloji’s control over the area.

periods and distinctive historical perspectives. Although there is some overlap of themes in these narratives, they are also temporally distinctive. There is, for instance, some conflation of genealogical myths in the later epigraphs of Calukyas and the early Puranas. Such conflation is significant for the sacral acknowledgement of authority. By contrast, later Muslim chronicles take an altogether different perspective of political aesthetics even when conjecturing on the early antecedents of Ellora Caves. Finally, the Mackenzie manuscript is structured around the prevalent local tradition (*Verūḷa Mahātmya*) that borrows and builds upon the Puranic sources to valorise the contemporary political–religious space. The authors of these texts are socially and intellectually engaged, and they parse through preceding narrative traditions to subtly engage, rework or demolish in their effort to establish a new normative. Each of these narratives negotiate a complex question about the past, which is, in fact, *not its* past. By looking into the narratives of the shifting culture of a place, I have tried to understand how the past is represented and negotiated in each of these traditions. There are, thus, different kinds of relationships that people in power have with the past, especially when it is not *their* past but one that they need to master.⁹⁵ In other words, how the historical consciousness is intrinsic to each of these narrative traditions explains the shift that takes place in the cultural traditions of Ellora.

The textual traditions also fashion, reformulate and control the ideas and institutions of their political and ideological worlds. But since they also engage with prior iterations, with time, they are progressively layered and complex. This is noticeable, for example, in the later Puranic texts and the MacKenzie manuscript, as well as in the sculptural narratives of the Ellora Buddhist caves, which carry Hindu names at least since the late medieval times. The case of Buddhist–Hindu goddess *Tārā*, for instance, stands out. The hybrid religious identity of the Buddhist *Tārā* is contested and is used as an instrument to classify the Buddhist-caves as Hindu-caves in the MacKenzie manuscript and other contemporary literature. Similarly, Ambika, the Hindu–Jain goddess, is used as an instrument to claim the Jaina-caves as Hindu, which are hence named as *Indrasabhā* or *Jagananātha-sabhā* in the Mackenzie manuscript and the contemporary literature. The co-options also point to the fabrication of popular beliefs and their projection in the historical consciousness. Thus, the sitting Buddha of Cave 10 becomes Visvakarma, the deity of artisans, and Cave 10, which is the only Buddhist *caitya*-prayer hall in the Ellora complex, came to be called the Visvakarma cave in the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial travelogues and Archaeological Survey reports. Such contestations and co-options have a bearing on how identities evolved around these monuments, which clearly became palimpsests for kingship.

⁹⁵ The subject has been studied solely in the context of modernity. For the best example, see the essays in Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*. Studying the subject in the long duration takes modernity out of the equation and allows for an engagement with more complex contexts and processes.

The texts are also the sites where time frames are interlaced. The linear time of Calukyan or Puranic genealogy moves closely with the sacred-time or theological-time of the Puranic myths that legitimate Calukyan and Rastrakuta kingships. The Calukyas, however, draw from mythic genealogies that are interlaced with the historical lineage, while the Rastrakutas rely on broad theological frames of Saivite ideas of kingship to legitimate the historical lineage. Later, Shirazi invents an altogether imaginary genealogy of the mythic builders of the caves to reflect on a space and its culture in pre-Islamic temporality. Thus, different types of genealogies and time frames are used in these narratives as a tool to situate, legitimate and integrate different polities engaging with and operating in Ellora.

The textual traditions are also the sites to explore the linguistic trajectories and dialogues between Prakrit, Pali, Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, English, Marathi and Konkani languages and dialects. This is reflected in the place-name, wherein the local pronunciations are Sanskritised, vernacularised and anglicised. These are also twisted linguistically. The homophonic *Veḷūra*, perhaps *Yeḷūra*, became *Veḷūraka* in Sanskrit, which transformed as a human embodiment of *Ila-Ilā* mythic association and the place came to be known as *Elāpura*, or *Ilācala*, which was colloquially known as *Elūr*, perhaps *Yeḷūra*. This was later anglicised as Ellora, even though medieval Bijapur and later Marathi documents call it *Yeḷūra* or *Veḷūra* and, eventually, *Verūḷa*.⁹⁶ This was more than just cultural transformation; the political interventions in this dialogue should not be missed. The toponym *Elāpura* / *Ilāvṛta* was associated with Pratisthana, the capital and pilgrim centre of *Ilāvṛta* that was situated on the banks of River Godavari. The hinterland of Godavari (*Gautamiḡaṅgā*) hence became a sacred territory, the *Gautamikhanda*, housing many pilgrim centres, including Nasik and *Ghuṣmeśvara* (*Guheśvara*/*Griṣeśvara*) in Ellora. This development has significant political connotations as the myths associated with the place-name were arrogated by the Calukyas to devise a genealogy centring on it. Politically, the constructed royal genealogy fused the lunar-solar dynasties but drew legitimacy from the frame story of the Ailias (*Ila-Ilā*) also associated with Ellora—the territory over which they ruled.

Persian chroniclers were seized by the scale and quality of the Ellora Caves. As they communicated the impact that these structures had on the powerful and influential visitors to the caves, it was a familiar political aesthetic and pre-Islamic temporality that was drawn upon. Ellora was conceived as a place for leisure and reflection, for the congregation of armies or a rendezvous for dalliance. Shirazi, therefore, recollects a genealogy of builders that approximated the pre-Islamic conception of Persepolis in Iran. Aurangzeb attributed the carving of these

⁹⁶ In the Nizam documents represented by the state of Akalkot to claim the headship rights over Verul, it is called 'Patilki of Kasba Yelora', 27 Safar 1314 AH or 6 August 1896. 'Translation of a Rukka from his HH the Nizam's Minister to the Resident no. 1706 dated 4 November 1896, Kolahpur Residency and the Deccan States Agency, No. 10', British Library, London, No. 19 1895-96 'Patilki Watan at Verul, in the Aurangabad in Nizam's territories.

structures to supernatural forces, an association reminiscent of Puranic notions, where Karkaraja's Baroda grant described the Kailasa Temple as self-existent. This political-sacred trope resonated in the Mackenzie manuscript, where non-human agency was invoked through Puranic stories of the sacred space of *Verūla*. This space was endowed with its own sacred text, *Verūla Mahātmya*, and a sacred centre: *Guheśvara/Griṣṇeśvara*. The creation of a sacred space subtly shifted the focus from the Ellora Caves to the village of *Verūla*, associated with Maloji Bhonsale, the founder of the Maratha dynasty. Notably, the Nizams of Hyderabad and the Mughals, Aurangzeb, in particular, are vilified in the Mackenzie text, a political necessity to eulogise their adversaries, the Marathas.

As the caves mirror evolving social structures and institutions, the Buddhist sacred spaces that are not transformed into Hindu caves are marginalised as polluted space (*dedhwārā*), visited by no one and inhabited by the untouchable castes. The past therefore is a dynamic imaginary that is read, contested and moulded with all the politics and prejudice of the present. The textual traditions of Ellora illustrates this dynamism over the *longue durée* very aptly.

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