



Heaven and Magic

*Formerly, elephants could wander
wherever they pleased and assume any shape.
They roamed as they liked in the sky and on earth.*

—Matangalila

Hewn out of the rock hills of Bhaja in the Deccan is a series of enigmatic cave-shelters dating from the 2nd to 1st centuries BCE. Ascribed to the Satavahana Period, these long-abandoned Buddhist *viharas* (monasteries) and a *chaitya* (chapel) are amongst the earliest examples of rock-cut architecture in India: they replicate in stone a more antique tradition of structural timber construction and ornamentation. Alongside a rock-cut doorway in Cave 19, a weathered and windswept relief carving presents one of the earliest surviving depictions of an elephant in Indian art (Fig. 3).

The giant pachyderm makes its way through an assemblage of minuscule people and animals. That this is no ordinary elephant, but an otherworldly creature, is suggested by its scale in relation to the other figures. At one of its feet crouches a smaller, earthly counterpart, seemingly paying obeisance. Elsewhere in the composition are a regal personage graced by dancers and musicians, a stupa, a tree in full bloom, a horse-like creature, a crocodile, and a snarling lion.

The principal elephant carries two male riders. The grander figure sports an elaborate headdress, a garland, heavy earrings and a bracelet. In his right hand is an *ankush* (elephant-goad), decorated with flowers. Seated behind, a less magnificent attendant bears two staffs and a pennant. The garlanded character is none other than Indra—primeval god of thunder, lightning, rain and moisture. The elephant is his personal *vahana* (vehicle), the legendary Airavatha. The uprooted tree in the elephant's trunk evokes the fury of a passing storm. A tiny human is shown falling off near the roots; others rush for cover as the elephant advances. The scene, however, is not one of terror and destruction, but an allegory of rain and renewal.

Since the earliest times, life and art in India have been inextricably linked with the cycle of seasons. In a civilization that is even today based largely on agriculture, rainfall is synonymous with fertility and good fortune. The symbolism of the cloud-elephant—enriching the earth as it sails through the sky with the god of weather on its back—is just one of the many ideologies shared by the Buddhist, Jain and Hindu traditions. Images of Indra and Airavatha feature in the sacred art of all three faiths.

Indra makes his debut in the Rig Veda, the earliest known religious text of the subcontinent and the foundation of all later Hindu scriptures. Thought to have been composed anywhere between 5000 BCE and 1200 BCE, the 1028 hymns contained in the work sing the praises of a vast pantheon of celestial, and predominantly male, divinities. The majority of the verses are dedicated to Indra: son of Dyayus, the Sky, and Pritivi, the Earth, and twin to Agni, the god of fire.

In his very first adventure, Indra vanquishes Vritasura, a demon of drought who has trapped the rain clouds, and saves the universe from annihilation. The exploit earns Indra the title of 'invincible weather-god'. Achievements in subsequent battles against evil elevate him to the status of king of gods and leader

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3. Indra and Airavatha

Rock-cut wall panel, volcanic trapstone, Cave No 19, Bhaja, Deccan, Satavahana Period, 2nd century BCE.

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4. Indra and Airavatha

Rock-cut wall panel, basalt, Indra Sabha Temple, Ellora, Deccan, Rashtrakuta Period, early 9th century.



in war, 'before whose pair of steeds carrying car in battle, enemies cannot stand.'¹ Indra's special attribute is an unfailing generosity towards all who laud him. The hymns also portray him as something of a connoisseur of the sacred intoxicant *soma*. As ruler of heaven and guardian of the east, his many weapons include a *vajra* (thunderbolt), a short lance known as the *paranja*, a quiver of arrows and a rainbow for the bow, an *ankush*, and Indrajala, the 'net of illusions'.

In post-Vedic literature, Indra's eminence begins to wane. His influence is gradually overshadowed by other Hindu deities such as Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshvara (Shiva). There are no temples dedicated exclusively to Indra. Depictions in sacred art generally restrict him to his original calling as weather-god.

That this once flamboyant figure should have an elephant as his *vahana* is no coincidence. The animal is large and magnificent. Generally composed, its spirit is capricious. Its fondness for water (and alcohol) is legendary. By a stretch of the imagination, a herd of lumbering elephants calls to mind a bank of thunderous rain clouds; like thunderstorms, elephants too are capable of untold destruction. If one of Indra's many epithets is Meghavan (cloud-rider), the name of his elephant means 'filled with moisture'. Airavatha, like his master, has other, more redolent names: Abhra-matanga (cloud-elephant); Arka-sodhara (sibling of the sun); Naga-malla (mighty elephant); and Sada-dana (ever in rut). In assigning the largest of land mammals to the king of gods, ancient India pays glowing tribute to the elephant's most feted attributes: strength, intelligence and longevity.

The original elephant of Hindu mythology, however, finds no mention in the Rig Veda where Indra's vehicle is always described as a golden chariot drawn by horses. Airavatha's own grand entry is reserved for a later creation myth² in which a collaboration of *devas* (gods) and *asuras* (demons) churn a cosmic ocean of milk to obtain an elixir of immortality. Among the numerous sacred objects and personifications that surface from the churning is a milk-white elephant with four tusks. Each tusk symbolizes a divine quality: *prabhu* (sovereignty), *mantra* (counsel), *utsaha* (exuberance), and *daiva* (fortune). The elephant's colour and regal bearing prompt Indra to effect a change in his mode of transport.

In a variation of the ocean-myth, Airavatha is accountable (albeit indirectly) for the churning of the ocean. Here, the elephant already belongs to the king of gods. Indra is in his palace one day when a sage, Durvasas, calls on him with a garland of flowers. After Durvasas has left, Indra drapes the garland over Airavatha's tusks. The flowers attract a swarm of bees; Airavatha tears off the garland and flings it afar. When Durvasas hears that his gift has been discarded—without knowing the exact circumstances—he flies into a rage and curses not just Indra but the entire pantheon of gods with old age and decrepitude; he also prescribes an antidote: in order to regain their perennial youth and good looks, the gods must churn the ocean to procure the elixir of immortality. The curse begins to take effect and the *devas* embark on their mission with the assistance of the *asuras*.

Airavatha, who has been consigned to the same ocean in disgrace (and for no fault of his), surfaces during the churning and is reunited with his master. Having spent aeons in the milk, he emerges white and cleansed of 'sins'.

A large-scale depiction of the god and his elephant is preserved at the eponymous Indra Sabha Temple in Ellora (Fig. 4). Although named for the king of gods, the rock-cut complex is, in fact, a Jain temple dedicated to Mahavira. Within its cavernous interiors, a subsidiary sculptural panel shows Indra as a fleshy warlord, holding forth in the arching shade of a *kalpavriksha*, the fabulous, wish-fulfilling tree-of-abundance that also surfaces from the churning ocean. Two attendants bearing *chamaras* (yak-tail flywhisks) flank the god. Peacocks roost in the tree above. Crouching at the ground level, Airavatha serves as Indra's throne, stoically bearing the magnificence of his master, whose 'belly, drinking deepest draughts of *soma* like an ocean swells'.³ Nothing in the depiction even remotely recalls the lightness of the older, Bhaja rendering; instead, the modelling here seems to radiate a quietly restrained mammoth strength. Outside, in the courtyard, a monolithic sculpture of Airavatha watches over the entrance of the complex,

5. Vishnu Ananthashayana
Wall panel, red sandstone,
Dashavatara Temple, Deogarh,
Central India, Gupta Period,
6th century.

