

Why Did the Portuguese Choose the Mandapeshwar Cave Complex to Build Their First Church in Salsette? Sacred Authority, Missionary Strategy, and Colonial Transformation in Sixteenth Century Salsette

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Abstract: *The reformation of the Mandapeshwar Cave Complex into the Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception between 1544 and 1547 is the earliest and most symbolically charged act of Christian expansion in the Salsette region. This article examines why the Portuguese deliberately selected Mandapeshwar an active Shaiva monastic centre for setting up their first church in Salsette. It argues that the choice was shaped by a convergence of Portuguese missionary ideology, Franciscan concepts of sacred displacement, strategic control of inland routes, and the economic appropriation of temple lands. While Mandapeshwar's architectural and religious important forms the contextual foundation of the study, the central focus stays on Portuguese intentions, actions, and colonial policy. Drawing upon Portuguese chronicles, Bombay Presidency records, Indian epigraphical evidence, and selective archaeological documentation from the MMRHCS Documentation of Caves in MMR, the article proves that Mandapeshwar was thoughtfully chosen as a site for asserting Christian supremacy and reshaping the socio-religious landscape of Salsette.*

Keywords: Mandapeshwar, Portuguese, Mount Poinsur, Salsette, António do Porto, Franciscan

1. Introduction

The Portuguese presence in western India during the sixteenth century marked a decisive transformation in the political, religious, and cultural history of the Konkan coast. Unlike earlier trading communities, the Portuguese combined commercial ambition with an explicit evangelical mandate sanctioned by the Crown and the Papacy. Following the Treaty of Bassein in 1534, Salsette and Bassein became an important components of the Estado da Índia, bringing the region under direct Portuguese political and ecclesiastical control. Christianity was deployed not merely as a faith but as an instrument of governance, social discipline, and imperial legitimacy.¹

Within this framework, the appropriation of prominent indigenous sacred spaces emerged as a purposeful colonial strategy. Hindu temples and monastic establishments embodied religious authority, economic power, and social continuity. Their conversion into churches allowed the Portuguese to dismantle existing belief systems while simultaneously appropriating their symbolic prestige. The Mandapeshwar Cave Complex became the first and most important site where this strategy was implemented in Salsette.

This article addresses a central historical question: why did the Portuguese choose Mandapeshwar to build their first church in Salsette? While Mandapeshwar's Shaiva past is essential to understanding the choice, the primary focus of this study lies in examining Portuguese motivations,

missionary ideology, administrative decisions, and the socio-cultural consequences of conversion.

2. Methodology

The researcher has employed both traditional and modern methods of research for the present study. Archival research by examining primary sources, such as legendary literature, documents, letters, diaries, government records, and other documents stored in archives. Textual analysis of the earlier written works, articles, books of subject scholars, journals, newspapers, and other publications are also referred. Archaeological research done by visiting and examining physical artifacts, Mandapeshwar caves, ruins of buildings, and other remains of the past societies in the region.

Mandapeshwar before Portuguese Intervention

Prior to Portuguese intervention, Mandapeshwar functioned as a living Shaiva monastic centre deeply embedded in the sacred geography of Salsette. Stylistic and architectural analysis dates the principal cave to the second half of the sixth century CE, placing it among the latest and most refined Shaiva rock-cut monuments in western India.² The mandapa-garbhagriha plan, residential cells, water tanks, and ritual drainage channels indicate sustained monastic occupation rather than occasional worship.

The presence of Lakulisha imagery firmly associates Mandapeshwar with the Pashupata Shaiva tradition, an early organized Shaiva sect characterized by ascetic discipline combined with institutional control over land and resources.³ Such institutions exercised both spiritual authority and

economic influence over surrounding villages, a fact that later made them attractive targets for colonial appropriation.

Portuguese chronicler Diogo do Couto provides direct testimony that, at the time of Portuguese arrival, the caves were inhabited by Shaiva ascetics, referred to as jogis, who controlled temple estates known in Portuguese records as pagodias.⁴ These lands generated revenue that sustained religious activity and reinforced Mandapeshwar's position as a centre of local authority.

Portuguese Missionary Ideology and Sacred Displacement

The conversion of Mandapeshwar must be understood within the broader ideological framework of Portuguese missionary policy. The Franciscan order, which played a leading role in Salsette, viewed the occupation of non-Christian sacred spaces as a powerful demonstration of Christian supremacy. Rather than demolishing temples, Franciscans often transformed them, thereby symbolically displacing indigenous deities while keeping the spatial sanctity of the site.

Paulo Varela Gomes has interpreted Mandapeshwar as analogous to the European Sacro Monte tradition, in which Christian sanctuaries were deliberately established on elevated landscapes already imbued with sacred meaning.⁵ The cave-studded hill of Mount Poinsur closely resembled such sacred terrains familiar to Franciscan spirituality, making Mandapeshwar an ideologically compelling choice.

This missionary logic explains why Shaiva sculptures at Mandapeshwar were not destroyed but concealed beneath thick layers of lime plaster. The act neutralized Hindu iconography while preserving the architectural shell, allowing the cave to be rapidly converted into a Christian chapel and crypt. Such practices reveal a calculated approach to religious domination rather than impulsive iconoclasm.

Strategic Geography and Colonial Administration

Geography played a critical role in Portuguese decision-making. Mandapeshwar is situated on Mount Poinsur, overlooking the Dahisar creek, which in the sixteenth century functioned as a navigable inland waterway linking Salsette to Sopara, Bassein, and the wider Konkan coast. Control over such routes was essential for Portuguese military movement, trade regulation, and missionary outreach.⁶

The elevated position of Mandapeshwar provided both defensive advantage and visual dominance. A church erected on this hill would be visible across surrounding villages, reinforcing the presence of Christianity within the landscape. For the Portuguese, visibility itself was a form of power, and Mandapeshwar offered an ideal stage for projecting colonial authority into the rural hinterland.

Conversion of Mandapeshwar: Events, Agents, and Institutions

The conversion of Mandapeshwar occurred between 1544 and 1547 under the leadership of Franciscan Friar António do Porto.⁷ Contemporary Portuguese sources describe the expulsion of resident Shaiva ascetics and the formal consecration of the cave for Christian worship. Initially

dedicated as Nossa Senhora da Piedade (Our Lady of Piety), the site later became associated with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

Above the cave, the Portuguese constructed a stone church and monastic complex, creating a vertical hierarchy in which Christian architecture physically dominated the earlier Shaiva shrine. This architectural superimposition was a deliberate symbolic act, asserting the triumph of Christianity over indigenous religious traditions.

Governor Jorge Cabral granted the revenues of Mandapeshwar village and its former temple lands to the Franciscans. These resources supported the Royal College of Mandapeshwar, set up by 1552 to educate converts and train clergy.⁸ The appropriation of temple wealth thus became integral to sustaining missionary institutions.

Socio-Cultural and Economic Consequences

The establishment of the church and college at Mandapeshwar had profound socio-cultural consequences for Salsette. Conversion campaigns reorganized village leadership, altered landholding patterns, and transformed ritual life. Christian festivals, Marian devotions, and processions replaced traditional Shaiva practices in areas under Portuguese influence.

Elsie Wilhelmina Baptista has noted that early institutions such as Mandapeshwar played a foundational role in shaping the East Indian Catholic community of Salsette, creating a distinct socio-religious identity aligned with Portuguese colonial authority.⁹ At the same time, resistance persisted, with many communities continuing Hindu practices discreetly or relocating beyond Portuguese-controlled zones.

Decline of Portuguese Authority and Later Reinterpretations

Portuguese dominance in Salsette ended abruptly with their defeat by Chimaji Appa in 1739. The collapse of Portuguese political power led to the abandonment of missionary institutions at Mandapeshwar and the decline of Christian activity at the site. Shaiva worship was subsequently revived, as evidenced by a Marathi inscription dated to Samvat 1911 (1854–55 CE) recording a donation to Mandapeshwar.¹⁰ During the British period, the site was reinterpreted as an antiquarian and archaeological monument, a process culminating in its designation as a protected monument under the Archaeological Survey of India in 1969.¹¹

3. Conclusion

The Portuguese choice of Mandapeshwar for setting up their first church in Salsette was a calculated act rooted in missionary ideology, strategic geography, and economic interest. Mandapeshwar's pre-existing Shaiva authority, institutional wealth, and symbolic prominence made it an ideal site for asserting Christian supremacy and colonial governance.

By examining Portuguese intentions and actions alongside the longer history of the site, this study shows that Mandapeshwar was not merely converted but reconfigured as a colonial instrument of power. Its later revival and archaeological

framing further underscore the layered and contested nature of sacred spaces in the history of western India.

Figures

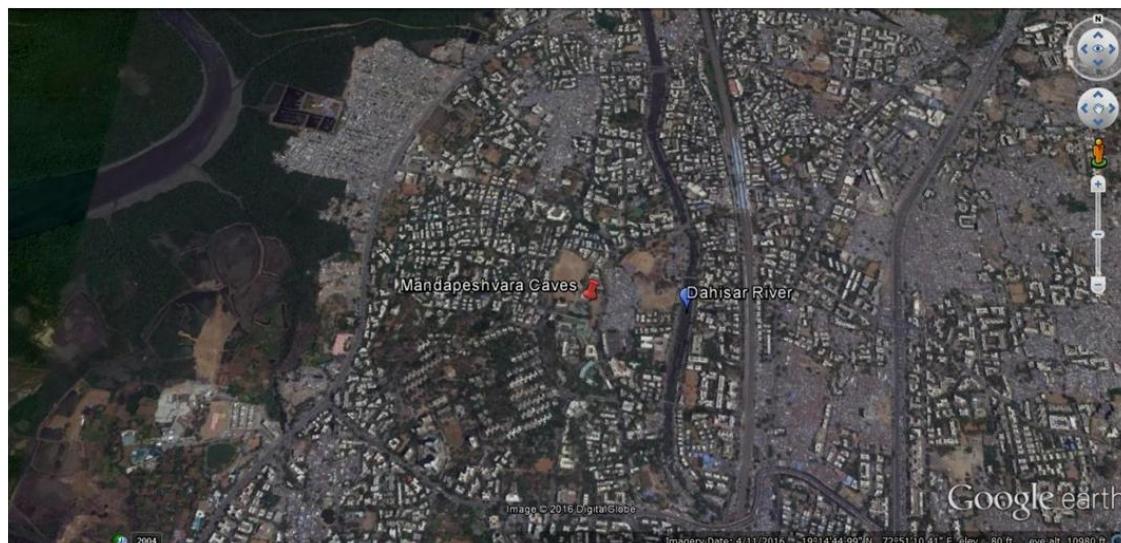


Figure 1: Location map of Mandapeshwar Cave Complex, Borivali West, Mumbai. Source: Documentation of Caves in MMR, pp. 540–542.

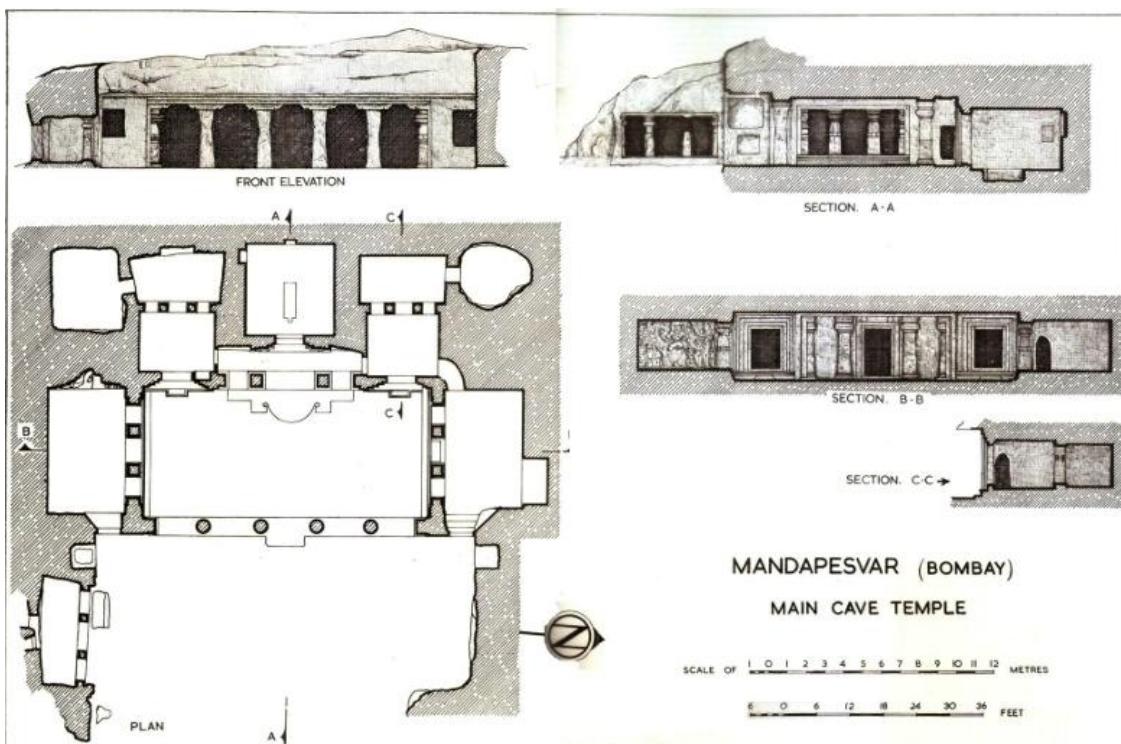
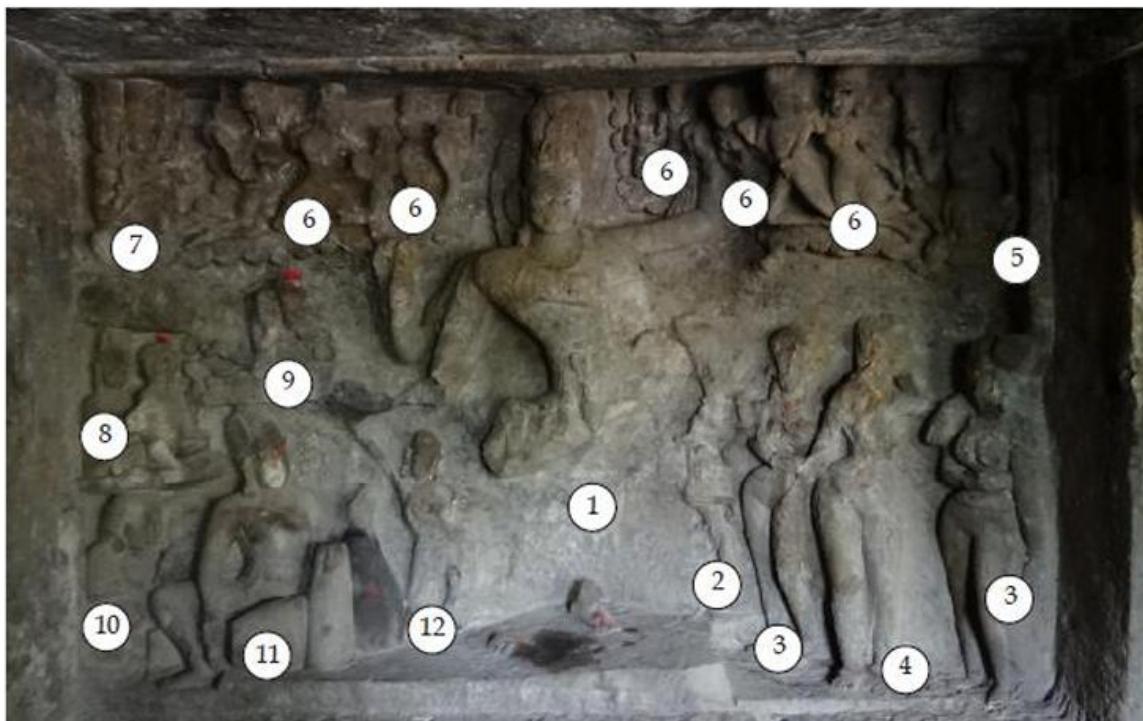


Figure 2: Plan and elevation of Mandapeshwar Cave showing mandapa, cells, and garbhagriha. After K. V. Soundara Rajan (1981), reproduced in Documentation of Caves in MMR, pp. 652–653.



1. Nataraja, 2. Attendant, 3. Female Attendant, 4. Parvati, 5. Vishnu and Garuda, 6. Vidyadaras, 7. Brahma, 8. Ganas, 9. Ganesh with One Gana, 10 Gana, 11. Drummer, 12. Bringi

Figure 3: Nataraja panel, Mandapeshwar Cave. Photograph from Documentation of Caves in MMR, pp. 654–655.

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