

Association of Elephants with Goddess Lakshmi: Myth, Ritual, and Temples

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ABSTRACT

Myths encapsulate what societies have envisaged of as sacred, and they articulate the manner in which the sacred is understood in that society. The paper tries to look on those myths associated with the goddess Lakshmi, which will help us understand her conceptualization, what she signifies and how vital she is to the cosmology visualized by brahmanical texts that were written over centuries. Lakshmi, like other deities, does not inhabit a world entirely of her own, she has to be studied in relation to other gods and goddesses and the various symbols associated with her. The symbols which are particular objects and attributes connected with Lakshmi lend character to her persona. A very common image of Lakshmi is one in which she is flanked by elephants who pour pots of water on her. This act of performing *abhisheka* is essential to constituting and reaffirming royal authority. At the popular level, a number of Jataka stories reflect some commonly held cultural perceptions about the elephant. The association of elephants with prosperity and with kingship is equally significant. Elephants are also associated with grandeur as can be seen in the Buddhist myth of Mahamaya. How important elephants are to the Hindu divine pantheon will be analysed through her association with Lakshmi. Images of Lakshmi, mostly accompanied by elephants on either side, have often been found on the lintels of temples, doors and gateways across the subcontinent, as prescribed in texts on art and architecture. The paper will discuss iconographic representation of Lakshmi as Gajalakshmi in the Chalukya temples in particular architectural spaces.

Keywords: *Lakshmi, Gajalakshmi, Elephant, Chalukya, Iconography*

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