

Aquatic (water) Animal world in Ancient Indian Art – A preliminary study

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Introduction

In Ancient Indian Art from 2500 B. C, (Indus Period) to 4th cen. A.D. (Gupta period) along with wild animals, domestic animals and birds, the depiction of aquatic animals is in various aspects. Major aquatic animals that can be seen in Ancient Indian Art are 1. Crab 2. Crocodile 3. Fish 4. Frog 5. Turtle 6. Otter. The depiction comes in different mediums such as stone sculptures , terracotta figurines, terracotta seals, metal figures, semi-precious stone , shell, ivory, painting on pottery, wall painting etc. In art, aquatic animal depiction is found in different periods. The evidence coming from different stratigraphic excavations can be shown chronologically – Indus period (2500 B. C), chalcolithic period (1500 B.C.), Megalithic period (1000 B. C.), early historic period (800 B. C.), Maurya period (3rd cen B.C.), Sunga – Satavahana period (2nd cen B.C. to 2nd cen A.D.), Shaka – Kushana period (2nd cen A.D. to 1st cen A.D.), Gupta- Vakataka period (4th cen A.D to 5th cen A.D.). In these periods, evidence of aquatic animal depiction can be seen from all the Indian sites.

In Indus period art, aquatic animals can be seen on terracotta seals and terracotta figures. Ahead in chalcolithic & megalithic period in metal figures made from copper. In Maurya-sunga dynasty period, stone sculpture was an important medium for depiction of animals. In Kushana period, the depiction of aquatic animals comes in semi-precious stones such as agate, carnelian, quartz etc. In Gupta-vakataka period, aquatic animal depiction appears very artistically on wall paintings of Ajanta caves.

Evidence

_____ In Indus art, fish, turtle, crocodile depiction is on pottery & on seals. A turtle figure made from shell is found from Mohenjodaro (Marshall, 1973: I: 349). From the Chalcolithic period, turtle figurine made from terracotta & a turtle shape amulet made from shell was recovered from Prakash (Maharashtra) excavation (Thapar, 1964-65: 115). Crocodile figure painting on pottery was found at Navdatoli (Madhya Pradesh) (Sankalia, 1971: 217) & terracotta figures of crocodile are discovered at Inamgaon (Maharashtra). (Dhavalikar, 1982: I: I: 589). From Raipur (Maharashtra), a turtle shape pendant made from copper is recovered. It is used as a horse ornament (Deglurkar, 1992: 147). Frog shape beads made from carnelian, agate found at Taxila (Afghanistan) are from Kushana to Gupta (1st cen A.D-4th cen A.D.) period (Beck, 1941:56). Fish shape pendant made from gold is also found at Sirkap (Taxila) which is from Kushana (1st cen A.D.) period (Marshall, 1975:II: 630). In Maurya-Sunga period aquatic animal depiction comes

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mainly on stone sculptures. The Buddhist stupas like Barhut, Sanchi, Amravati show various types of sculptural depiction which include aquatic animals in context with *jataka* tales. Aquatic animals such as Crab, Crocodile, Fish, Frog, Otter appear in *jataka* tale sculptures at Barhut, Sanchi, Amaravati, Nagarjunkonda and Ajanta in paintings. Crab in *Naga jataka*, crocodile in *Vanara jataka*, fish & Otter in *Uda jataka* & *Sasa jataka*, frog in *Latuva jataka*, turtle in *Kuranga mruga jataka* & *Kachhapa jataka* (Cowell, 1957) are depicted.

From Kushana-Gupta period, crocodile comes as a *vahana* of Goddess Ganga and Turtle comes as a *vahana* of Goddess Yamuna in Indian art. An Ivory figure of Goddess Ganga standing on a *Makara* (crocodile) was found at Begram (Taxila, Afganistan) (Pandey, 1984:83). At Devgarh, Sanchi, ahichhatre was found sculptural evidence of Makara as *vahana* of Goddess Ganga from Kushana-Gupta period. Turtle shaped pendants can be seen on some *Yaksha* figures. One *Yaksha* figure was found at Panna (Madhya Pradesh) wearing a necklace with turtle pendent. At Ellora cave no. 21 two *gana* figures were found wearing a turtle shaped pendent. An amulet or a pendent made from stone or semi-precious stones or metal are not just as ornaments but connection of these animals with water is very important. It shows society has a faith on aquatic animals as a God which brings rain and prosperity. Because of faith aquatic animals receive safety as well as respect. Till today if rain comes late or it drops less people worship Frog & other aquatic animals.

Fish (*Matsya*) duo is symbol of purity. Fish duo pendent is important in *Manglya* necklace. *Matsya*, *Kurma* are important *avtara* of God Vishnu. In the episode of *samudra manthana* *Kurma* was very useful because of his hard shell to carry a load of mountain *meru*. Goddess *Vasudhara* has a fish duo in her right hand as a symbol. In *Jaina* art fish is a very important animal. Fish is one of the auspicious symbols in *Jaina* sect. *Kurma* or turtle is a symbol of *Jaina Tirthankar santinatha*.

Atharveda mentions *Kurma* as a sun. Wearing an amulet or a pendent of *Kurma* makes the person very strong. As per *Brihat samhita Kurma shila* (Turtle shape stone) in a hall of temple, make the structure very hard, united & give prosperity to the king who built the temple. (Arole meera, 1986-87: 251). It may be because *Kurma* has a long life expectancy & his hard shell. *Atharveda* also mentions that wearing a Frog shape amulet is very effective for fever. (Margbandhu, 1975-76: 86). Frog was a fertility symbol in ancient civilization like Babylon, Egypt, Mesopotamia. *Matsya* was a symbol of dynasty like Pandya, Saindhav in Saurashtra. In Kushana-Gupta period, some animals were used in the trade between India and China such as elephants, rhinoceroses, horses, peacocks & turtles or turtle shells, which were very important commodities (Xinru liu, 1988;).

Summary

The above discussion shows that the depiction of Aquatic animals in Ancient Indian Art was under the influence of socio-religious-economic-political reasons. Myths, beliefs, trust, quality of aquatic animals are important aspects in Ancient Indian art. Stone, terracotta, metal, semi-precious stones were mediums used for depiction. Always touch with water means life made aquatic animals very sacred in society. Fish, Frog, Turtle shape amulet, pendants recovered for archaeological excavations show their sacred religious status in society. Aquatic animals play an

important role in Buddhist *jataka* stories. They taught ethics to people. In *veda*, *puranas* aquatic animals are mentioned as *vahana* or carrier of Gods and Goddesses. Society gives importance to aquatic animals because they maintain ecological balance. The qualities of Crab, Crocodile and Turtle can help human beings to be positive or negative and this is mentioned in *jataka* stories. In fact, very good examples can be seen at Barhut, Nagarjunkonda sculptures.

This is a preliminary survey of Aquatic animals' depiction in Ancient Indian Art which covers various mediums, different periods, contexts, some literature evidence & their connections with religions.

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