

## **Elephants in Indian Art: with Special Reference to Magadha (Bihar)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Elephant has been an important motif in Indian Art. It has been a popular motif in all the three popular religions of India i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. It is always represented in Gaja-Lakshmi images on either side of Lakshmi, some time with pitchers. The God of Gods Indra is believed to have a white elephant named Airavata as his vehicle (vāhan). Lord Ganesha, one of the most popular Indian deities and the Lord of Wisdom bears an elephant head. The elephant head symbolizes great intellect and wisdom. Gajalakshmi images are depicted since Sunga period. Gajalakshmi, i.e., Lakshmi with elephants, is one of the most significant Ashtalakshmi aspects of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi. In this aspect, the goddess is depicted seated on a lotus, flanked on both sides by an elephant (gaja). She is shown as seated in Padmasana yogic posture and has four arms. In each of her upper pair of arms, she carries a lotus and the lower hands are generally shown in abhaya and varadamudra. The elephants flanking her are shown as pouring water from their trunk over the goddess. This aspect like most other aspects of Lakshmi is representative of prosperity, good luck and abundance and the Gajalakshmi motifs are very common in Hindu and Buddhist iconography. The earliest available depictions of Gajalakshmi appear on a coin (3rd century) from Kausambi.

Even in Buddhism elephant is a popular animal. It is said that before the birth of the Buddha, the elephant is associated with Queen Māyā of Sakya and the mother of Gautama Buddha saw a dream in which a white elephant entering her womb. It is also noticed on pillar of Ashoka. It is one of the four animals depicted on Saranath pedestal depicting four lion pillars. The first massive representation of this animal is also noticed in the Mauryan Art at Dhauli in Orissa. In Jainism it was a lañchana depicted with Ajith Nath.

Elephant was quite popular even as an animal with terracotta artists. Several terracotta figurines of elephants have been discovered from various excavated sites of Northern India, particularly from Bihar of Mauryan period. The story of Udayana and Vasavadatta is also not complete without the depiction of an elephant. Elephants are also a symbol of royalty as Maharajas and kings used to ride them during processions as well as during war. Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya reported the use of war elephants during warfare. The motif of three riders on an elephant occurs several times in terracotta and stone sculpture as well as in rock cut monument. Thus, the

form might be invested with a symbolic meaning which far exceeds the episodic value in literature.

In fact, this symbol of royalty has been quite popular with artists. In my paper, I will try to give a basic knowledge of this animal motif in religious as well as secular art.

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