Elephants: All Immanent in Indian Temple Art

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Nature provides feelings to human mind. Art is the reflection of feelings which germinates in the embryo of nature. Indian civilization has its own way of artistic expression which can be seen in Indian temples. Both in execution of temple architecture and sculpture of India nature played a crucial role. It may be noticed that symbolically and naturally the animal world, flora and fauna present themselves in Indian temple art. For their majestic power, human friendly nature and being the symbol of divinity and prosperity elephants were highly venerated in Indian art and religion.

In *Vāstusāstras* enumeration of different kind of temple architecture including plan and elevation is noted down which has a category termed as *hastip[stha* or elephant back where apsidal plan of the temple resemble the rear portion of the elephant. This way of apsidal building can be seen in Kapoteśvara temple at Chezarla and Durgā temple at Aihole in south India. This is an example how people formed their concepts regarding shapes of temples taking support of the instances from nature.

Canonical texts show that oval type of buildings which resembles the shape of back of the elephant is termed as *gaja, kunjara* or *airāvata,* different names of elephant in Sanskrit language. In verse 171 of chapter XIX of *Mānasara* one of the eight kinds of single storied buildings is *hastip[stha* which has oval steeple.[1]. The temple with an oval roof is termed as *hastip[stha.* The chapter XXIII again mentions one kind of five storied buildings as termed as *airāvata* (lines 3-12). In chapter 104 of *Agni Purāna* oval shaped buildings are included, one of which is *gaja* described in verses 19-20.[2] In verses 29-30 of chapter 47 of *Garuda Purāna* five classes of buildings are enumerated and among them the buildings of fourth class naming *Mānika* are of oval shape, one of them is termed as *gaja.*[3] In verses 36,41,49,53 of chapter 269 of *Matsya Purāna* one of the twenty kinds of buildings is termed as *gaja,* 16 cubits broad and should be topped by many *candrasālas* or top rooms.[4] In *Bhavishya Purāna* twenty kinds of buildings are named in chapter 130 and here verse 32 describes one type of building as *kuGjara.*[5] Again in *B[hat Samhitā* we have twenty kinds of temples in chapter LVI, among them the *kuGjara* is mentioned in verse 25.[6] In chapter XLIX, verse 22-202 of *SamarāEgaGa Sutradhāra* in its theoretical categorization of 64 type of temples have two types naming *gajayuthapa* and *hastijātiya.* Categorically they belong to the *Vairajya* class of *vimāna* or temple, square in execution.[7] So it denotes that these theoretical categorizations though not always executed practically, but always used *gaja* as a term to mark some kind of category of building in theory prescribed in the canonical texts.

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Probably, the *gajaprsthakrti vimāna* or temple originated from the Buddhist *chaitya* where often the *stupa* was placed in the rear of the cell of *chaitya* and surrounded by an ambulatory resulting in an apsidal back of the structure. Most of the *chaityas* of Nagarjunikonda of Satavāhana period and other Buddhist sites of Andhra Pradesh possess apsidal structures. The noteworthy point is that even the concept was borrowed from Buddhist *chaityas* but this type of temple architecture was termed as *gajaprsthakrti vimāna*, denoting the shape of an elephant where the other type of structures like 'square' or 'circular' termed simply and grammatically *caturaśra* or *vrttāyata*, terms derived from theory of geometry.

These temples were mostly associated with Lord Śiva and built in south India. Generally, these temples have apsidal plan and in elevation it resembles to the rear of a standing elephant. The apsidal plan is composed of a semi-circular part in rear and an oblong part in front. It is actually a combination of both the circular and square form. These temples may be one storied or two storied. As for example, the small *gajaprsthakrti* shrine dedicated to local god Sasta in the complex of Vaddakkunathan temple of twelfth century situated at Trichur of Kerala, is a simple one storied apsidal building but the Subrahmaniya temple at Payyanur of Kerala is a two storied *gajaprsthakrti* temple.

There are numerous examples of *gajaprsthakrti vimāna* in south India. The temples of Dharmeśvara at Manimangalam; the Śiva temples of Sumangalam, Pennagaram, Bhara Dvajasrama near Arcot; Tirrupulivanam and Konnur near Chennai are shaped as *gajaprsthakrti Vimāna*. [8] The Parameśvara temple of Gudimallam though may be termed as *lingakrti vimana*, as the shape resembles *linga* and close study of plan and section supports the view, but at the same time it has so called *gajaprsthakrti* shape. [9] The Virattaneśvara temple at Tiruttani and Nakula-Sahadeva ratha at Mahabalipuram, built in Pallava period, are of the same plan. [10] The Nakula-Sahadeva ratha is a *dvayasra* structure (two sided with apse end) with a U-shaped curve. Near the Nakula-Sahadeva ratha a life size sculpture of an elephant is carved out of a living rock to emphasize the resemblance. The pilasters of *mukhamanapa* have elephant base where these are used as caryatids. The Kapoteśvara temple at Chezrala in Kerala is noteworthy for its *gajaprsthakrti* form.[11] The famous Durgā temple of Aihole built in Chalukya period is also noteworthy for its apsidal plan and elevation. Occasionally apsidal or *gajaprsthakrti* shrine was dedicated to Ganesha, as for example the Sundareśvara temple at Nangavaram in Tiruchirapalli District of Tamilnadu has a sub shrine dedicated to Ganeśa.

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[1]. *Hindu Architecture in India and Abroad*, Mānasāra Series no. 6, (ed) P.K. Acharya, New Delhi, 1934, reprinted 2006, pp.190

[2]. *Dictionary of Hindu Architecture*, (ed.) P.K.Acharya, New Delhi, 1934, reprinted 1997, p.404

[3]. *op.cit* p.405

[4]. *op.cit* , p.409

[5]. *op.cit* , p.411

[6]. *op.cit* , p.412

[7]. Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, vol.I, p. 281

[8]. *Five Vana inscriptions at Gudimallam*, Ind. Ant., vol. XI., p.104, line 6, note 2

[9]. *Ibid*

[10]. *Pallava Antiquities*, vol.II, pp.19-20, plate I and III

[11]. Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, vol.1, p.127

Matsya Purāna in verses 7-15 of chapter 270 prescribes twenty seven kinds of *manapas* or halls divided according to the number of columns. These theoretical categories were not applied in practice but the noteworthy thing is that the term *gaja* was in frequent use in theory. Here theoretically *manapas* having fifty two columns are termed as *gaja bhadra*. But this is not based on plan or shape, because the text informs that these *manapas* could be of triangular, crescent, circular, square, octagonal and sixteen sided. So, this term *gaja bhadra* is not related with any kind of resemblance to the shape of elephant connected with the plan of the structure. So, it seems that the word *gaja* was used in theory of architectural treaties frequently even when it was not connected with elephant like shape in plan or elevation of the architecture.

Limbs of an elephant were chosen to name the creation of various parts of a temple. The shape of the trunk of an elephant, used to be employed as architectural member generally in the staircase. As described below:

"Dvāra mukha sopānam hasti-hastena bhūsitam" (*Manasāra,* XIX, 211)

"Sopāna-pārśvayor deśe hasti-hasta-vibhūshitam" (*Manasāra*, XXX,155)

The frontal step of staircase in temples moulded in the shape of the trunk of an elephant show the application of the first description. One can find a practical example of the second verse in the shape of the side buttress of the staircases of the temples from Kashmir to Deccan.

The characteristic plasticity of trunk of the elephant is again applied in hand gesture of figure sculpture. In human or divine figures embellished on temples one most common hand gesture is *gajahasta* mentioned in canonical texts, *Nātyaśāstra* of Bharata and *Abhinayadarpana* of Nandikeśvara. The hand hanging down beside the body or in front the torso resting like the trunk of an elephant and keeping in ease attuned with a serene appearance of the figure is termed as *gajahasta*.[12] The female figures including divine and secular are presented in the gesture and even this is applied in the figure of multi handed Namarāja, where one of the hands rests in ease and executes the gesture. (Plate 1&2)

Another hand gesture is known as *gaja danta hasta*. When two palms touch opposite arms by the elbows in a cross way style it is called the *gaja danta hasta*. Resembling the power of the tusks of an elephant this *mudrā* or hand gesture is used to express the activity of the uplifting of a piece of heavy stone or uprooting of a tree.[13] This gesture can be seen in the narrative panels of temples depicting mythical stories.

Elephants are subject to sculptural art embellished in Indian temples. They are presented in a naturalistic way in basal mouldings of temples, in architraves or the capitals of the pillars as caryatids.

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[12].H.L.Shukla, *Semiotica Indica, Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Body-Language In Indian Art & Culture*, Vol.I, p.148, New Delhi, 1994

[13]. *Ibid*

Perhaps the role played by them as a beast of burden for the benefit of human civilization inspired artisans to place the animal in such a position. Even its contribution well equipped by mythical stories narrated in the *Purānas* like the weight of the universe is resting on divine elephants oriented the concepts of Indian artisans. Because according to canonical texts the temple is symbolic of the universe and as according to the *Purānas* or Brahmanical mythological stories the divine elephants are bearing the weight of the universe, so the representation of elephants in basal mouldings of a temple is perfectly attuned with the conception.

In Tamilnadu, a typical representation of animals can be seen in the basal mouldings of the temples, which is termed as *yala-vari* in Tamil language. In *yala-bari* animals are depicted in miniature forms and these are carved in the basal moulding, both in naturalistic and in imaginative way of execution. In south India, practically there may be Buddhist origin of this artistic devise of ornamentation to decorate basal mouldings with animal creatures. Usually, bull, lion, horse and elephant are the subject of the *yala-vari;* it seems this idea was borrowed from the Buddhist structures like *stupa* as can be seen in Amaravati where these animals are placed in base. All these animals have a special place of importance in Buddhist religion. Perhaps this idea of carving pious animals in base inspired the artisans and builders in Pallava period (c.600A.D. -850A.D.). They decorated temples with these auspicious animal figurines. This *yala-vari* can be seen in the Dharmarajaratha at Mahabalipuram and rock cut shrine at Mogalarajapuram, built in Pallava period. [14] This legacy continued till the medieval period. Later, in the Hoyasāla temples of late medieval period this feature was adopted and these are lively and naturalistic in representation though rich in ornamentation.

In North India, the placement of elephant figures in basal mouldings is termed as *gajathara* in canonical texts. These presentations are of various kinds placing the figure in profile or in oblique or in straight posture. Plenty of examples of early medieval and late medieval temples of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Deccan present this feature where *gajathara* is very prominent in basal mouldings. The Surya temple of Konarak possesses in its basal moulding miniature figures of elephants, well known for its excellence of carving which is naturalistic expressing the majestic power of the creature. The temple of Janjgir was built in the period of Jājalyadeva I, the Kalacuri ruler of Kosāla (modern Chhattisgarh). [15] It presents moulding at *vedībandha* with carvings of miniature elephants in mode of walking raising upward their heads. (Plate 3) This feature can be seen in the Śiva temple of Ghatiari in Chhattisgarh, built in between 10th to 11th century A.D. in the realm of Fanināga dynasty.(Plate 4) The elephants seemed to be tamed, as human figures are carved in between them and these creatures are not vigorous but calm and without any wild passion in their stance as can be seen in domesticated animals. So it can be seen placing elephants in basal mouldings became a common feature and sometimes artisans simply carved the animal figure monotonously without the expression of the glory of mythical creature holding the weight of the temple. This feature was so popular among the artisans and builders of the temples that even in the valley of Kashmir the temples have elephant figures

[14]. Bulletin of The Madras Government Museum, *Beginnings of the Traditions of South Indian Temple Architecture,* (ed.) P.R.Srinivasan,Chennai, 1999, p.18

[15]. J.D.Beglar, Report of Archaeological Survey of India, 1904-1906, Western India

carved in basal mouldings as caryatids where elephant is not available in natural way. One can find such instances in the temple of Pandrethan,[16] built roughly in c.11th or 12th century A.D.

This feature was also adapted by the builders and artisans of Jain temples. As for instance, the *gajathara* is a conventional part of the basal mouldings of Caulukya temples at Gujarat built in between 9th to 12th century. This feature was also followed by the temple builders at village Un in Madhya Pradesh. The region originally was under the sway of the Paramāra rulers of Malwa, but later in c. 1150 A.D. was invaded by the Caulukyas of Gujarat. Some temples were erected here after the region was invaded by Kumarapāla Caulukya of Gujarat. These temples of Un were affiliated to Jain religion and were built by Jains. It seems that after the invasion took place, many Jain merchants migrated to the area from Gujarat and built temples following the architectural characteristics of temples of Gujarat. Hence the *gajathara* was applied in the basal mouldings of these temples.[17] The Jain temple of Arang in Chhattisgarh, built in Kalacuri period approximately in 11th-12th century A.D. also possesses *gajathara* as one of the basal mouldings. Actually there are numerous instances where one can see *gajathara* in the basal mouldings of the temples. This feature of carving elephants in basal mouldings of temples remained a common feature in India even in Mughal period, this was followed in temple decoration all over India as can be seen in terracotta temples of Bengal for instance. (Plate 5)

As ornamental motifs, the sole of a temple can have heads of animals and human beings housed in miniature niches. As for example, the fillets of the sole of temple of Ramgarh of District Kota has heads of animals and man in successive way as following- *kirtimukha,* elephant, lion, horse and man. These faces are not blunt, but are glorified with vigorous expression and as a result, the whole creation becomes lively.[18]

Fantastic creations of human imagination presents fancy animals like *Ihām[ga; i.e. gajavaktrajhasha* where the animal has the face and trunk of an elephant and the hind quarter of fish united in a single creature. These can be seen in abundant in south Indian temples till medieval period. These were mentioned in canonical texts as well as in *Rāmāyana* regarding the description of *Puspaka ratha* of demon king Rāvana.[19]

There are other kinds of mythical combinations of elephants with birds which is a common feature of temples of Jammu and Kashmir. Examples can be seen in Avantisvami temple of Avantipur, built by king Avantivarman in between c. 852A.D. to 885 A.D. This instance can be seen again in Śiva temple at Krimchi in Jammu built in the late medieval period. (Plate 6)

There are some fancy creatures such as *gajavyāla* which has the head of an elephant and the figure of a *śārdula. Śārdula* is a kind of imaginative animal shape 'made by art' or *krtrima-grāsa*

[16.] Debala Mitra, *Pandrethan, Avantipur and Martand*, New Delhi, 1977, p.21

[17.] Swati Mondal Adhikari, *Some Paramāra Temples from Madhya Pradesh A Case Study of village Un,* Delhi, 2014, p 87

[18]. Stella Jramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, vol.II, New Delhi, 1976, P.146

[19]. C.Sivaramamurti, *Sanskrit Literature and Art-Mirrors of Indian Culture*, Memoirs of The Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, 1999, p 2

as has been described in the *Samarāngana Sutradhāra* (chapter LVII, 643). *Gaja-virāla* is the same creature and the term is used in Orissa.[20] One specific motif was styled as *gaja-siAha* and it was a general feature of temple sculptures especially in medieval temples of eastern India. Temples of Orissa present numerous instances of *gaja-simha.* Generally *gaja-simha* is a combination of rampant lion on the elephant in a mood of fighting. Here the elephant is symbol of darkness caused by ignorance and the lion is the symbol of victory caused by knowledge. In Chhattisgarh, the temple of Tuman, built in Kalacuri period, possesses *gaja-simha* in basal moulding where the figure of rampant lion is in profile placed on the crouching elephant. (Plate 7&8)

Representation of elephants can be noticed in the doorways and in the parapets of staircases of temples. According to *Śilpasāstras* and *Vāstusāstras* the deities should be treated as a king hailed with royal paraphernalia. As Krishna Deva writes," The deity dwelling in the temple symbolizes the king of kings and is consequently offered regal honour, consistent with the concept of God, as the supreme ruler of the universe."[21] The word *prāsāda* means both a royal palace and a temple, so sculptures of attendant elephants were executed in front the temples in honour of God. Examples can be seen especially in temples of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Hoyasāla temples of Karnataka. Even the Jain *bāsādis* of Halebidu in Karnataka witnessing the Hoyasāla period, have such attendant elephants at the door.

Both domesticated and wild elephants were a subject of sculpture and painting. .(Plate 9 & 10) Naturalistic presentation of fighting elephants either in battlefield or in forest in their own domain; elephants in a procession etc. are common subject in panel sculptures of temples all over India. The life size figure of elephant near Dhauli in Orissa is perhaps a majestic way of representation of the emperor Asoka. The Lomashrishi cave at Barabar in Bihar built in Mauryan period presents miniature freeze of walking elephants on the archway above the door. This legacy continued in Indian art and there may be seen instances in the paintings of cave temples of Ajanta, mainly created in Vākātaka and Gupta period. Here one can notice the elephants in lotus pond or in the forest breaking the branches of the trees. Processions with domesticated elephants were also painted there. All these presentations are at the same time realistic and idealistic expressions. They express the power and beauty of nature. Some instances show the relationship of man and elephant where elephants are presented as domestic animals. In these cases, the representation is natural and realistic.

The canonical texts dedicated chapters to discuss about the nature and stables made for the elephants. As for example, the *Samarāngana Sutradhāra* written by king Bhoja, the Paramāra ruler who ruled in between 1000 A.D. to 1055 A.D., contains a full chapter to deal with the architecture of elephant stables or *Gajasālās*. It has prescribed in chapter no. 29 that there are six kinds of *Gajasālās- Subhadrā, Nandini, Subhogadā, Bhadrikā, Varsani* and *Parmarikā.* [22] These *Gajasālās* had windows, corridors and towers in different modes and directions. Among these, the first five were

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[20]. Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, vol.II, New Delhi, 1976, p.333

[21]. Krishna Deva, *Temples of North India,* New Delhi,1969, p.1

[22]. Bhoja· s *Samarāngana Sutradhāra* (ed.) Pushpendra Kumar, Part.1,Delhi, 1998, p.xxi

treated to be auspicious and the last one inauspicious. So, canonical texts related to art and architecture considered elephants not only auspicious to be represented in temple art and architecture but also prescribed for their welfare.

The relation between mankind and elephants is reflected in temple architecture, sculptures and paintings. Depended on nature, man always remembered and venerated the animal world, especially the elephant for its contribution to the rise and growth of human civilization. In India, this inter relationship is reflected in religious rituals and festivals, where we see elephants as a part of religious processions and rituals. As for example, it can be seen in sculptural motifs that goddess Gajalakcmi is coroneted by pious water of river Ganges by the elephants. In sculpture two elephants are represented in both sides of the goddess Gajalakcmi with pitchers holding by trunks above the head of the goddess and pouring the water on the goddess. Thus elephants are connected and represented in temple art and sculpture as a part of religious rituals in India.

The elephant was perhaps the noblest of all animals, for it was claimed in Indian tradition that a cloud gave birth to it. In all the Indian religions, elephant is venerated as a pious animal. In Brahmanism, elephant is honoured as the vehicle of god Indra as *Airāvata* and the elephant headed Lord Ganeśa is worshipped as the patron of intellectuals and remover of all obstacles. In Buddhism white elephant is the symbol of the Buddha. Elephant is referred for their wisdom and affection worthy nature in *Jātaka* stories, the tales related to previous births of the Buddha. In Jainism elephant is symbol of Tirthankaras. Thus elephant was always related with the religious scenario in India. For its majestic and aesthetic appeal it again overwhelmed the arena of art and culture. It helped Indian artisans to imagine and to create. This creative impulse was crystallized on temple walls, mouldings and pillars and even the structures were termed as *gajaprsthakrti* resembling the shape of an elephant. Symbolizing might and wisdom, fidelity and prosperity the elephant always had illustrations and representations in the temple art and architecture of India.

Glossary

airāvata-the mythical elephant

candrasāla - rooms on rooftop to see the moon

caturaśra-square

chaitya-buddhist temple to enshrine a *stupa* or some image

gaja -elephant

gaja danta hasta-a bold hand gesture resembling the tusks of elephant

gajahasta-a tender hand gesture resembling the trunk of elephant

gajathara – band of elephants carved in basal mouldings

gajaprsthakrti- of the shape of the rear portion of an elephant

gajasālā –elephant stable

gaja-simha –an ornamental motif consisting of lion and elephant

Gaja-virāla- an ornamental motif consisting of lion and elephant, used in Orissa

Gajavyāla-an imaginative composition of elephant and some other creature

Gajayuthapa-a theoretical category of temple prescribed in canonical texts

hastijātiya.- a theoretical category of temple prescribed in canonical texts

hastiprstha- back of elephant

Ihāmrga – an imaginative composition of a creature possessing the head of an elephant and hind part of a fish

Kirtimukha- an imaginative motif of face of glory

kunjara-elephant

linga- the phallus, the symbol of Siva, related to *Śaiva* religion and worship

manapa-hall

mānika- a theoretical category of temple prescribed in canonical texts

mukhamanapa- the frontal hall

mudrā-hand gesture

prāsāda-temple/building

śārdula- an imaginative composition of a creature possessing the body of a lion sometimes having six legs

stupa – the relic tower related to Buddhism

Vairajya- *a* theoretical category of temple

vrttāyata- circular

yala-vari- a moulding carved with miniature animal figures in south Indian temple

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Pl 1 Namarāja application of *gajahasta* in lower left hand

Tandeśvara temple Jageśvar Katyuri period c. 11th century

Pl 2 Goddess Yamuna left hand in *gajahasta*.Jageśvar Katyuri period c. 11th century

Pl 3 *Gajathara* in basal moulding, Visnu Temple, c.11th A.D., Kalacuri period,

Janjgir Chhattisgarh

Pl 4 *Gajathara* in basal moulding, Śiva Temple, c.10th-11th centuryA.D., Fanināga period

Ghatiari Chhattisgarh

Pl. 5 Placing elephants in the basal mouldings of temple continued as a tradition Keshtorai temple 1655A.D. Malla dynasty Vishnupur West Bengal

Pl. 6 Fanciful creature with face and trunk of elephant, fanciful creature, Śiva temple, c 11th century A.D., Krimchi Jammu

Pl 7, 8 *gaja simha*, Śiva temple,C. 11th century, Kalacuri period, Tuman Chhattisgarh
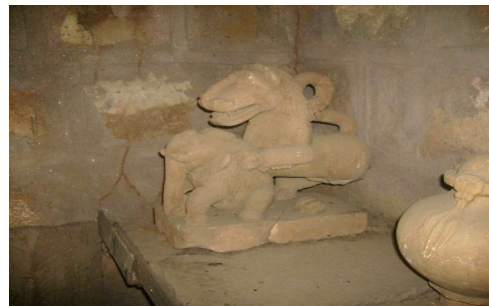
Pl 9   Elephants in domestic bliss, bearing the water pitcher for worship in both sides and trained elephants with their patrons in typical stance in center,   Visnu temple, c.11th century, Kalacuri period, Janjgir   Chhattisgarh

Pl 10   Wild elephant in forest breaking a tree, in center, Keshtorai temple, 1655A.D.,

Malla period, Vishnupur, West Bengal