

Elephant as a Fertility Symbol in Indian Art and Religion

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Elephant as a sacred motif occupies a significant place in Indian art, religion and philosophy. Basically, elephant in Indian symbology is an emblem of the power of progeny. It signifies the fertility power in different ways. Elephant has multiple metaphors that reveal its inner attributes as a pious animal. Mythologically, it is the vehicle of Lord Indra, the supreme God of the Rigvedic pantheon. It is, in fact, a mythical white elephant that has been called *Airavata*. *Airavata* is a celestial animal on that the God Indra rides upon. Indra is the rain God, again a phenomenon that is linked to fertility. The Rigveda has different hymns associated with water cosmological thought. Indra is one who being a space God forms water and ensures downpour on the earth. Similarly, by killing *Vrita*, a demon Indra released a large sum of territorial water.

Here, It is pertinent to mention that *Airavata*, being the vehicle of Indra, symbolizes the formation of cloud and its movement in the sky. According to mythology, *Airavata* is the son of *Iraa*. *Iraa* is female aspect of procreation. The word *Iraa* means procreative white fluid that contains all possibilities and potential for life and birth. Being son of *Iraa*, the *Airavata* symbolizes the life principle that is imbued in water. Etymologically, *Airavata* called a *Gaja* is a space animal. The alphabets 'ga' and 'ja' respectively stand for 'gagana (sky) and *Janma* (birth). It means 'gaja (elephant) is a sky born animal. It is explicit that the word 'gaja' itself is denotative to the massive cloud and its movement in the sky.

The Vedic ontological expression has a remarkable impact an artistic representation of elephant in the entire course of Indian art history. Art historically, the first representation of elephant is found on Harappan seals. It is evident that along with the humped bull it was a popular symbol. However, its association with the fertility cult of the Harappan period cannot be established as the script of that era still remains un-deciphered.

In the early Buddhist religion, again the elephant emerged as a prominent art motif. The birth story of Lord Buddha, itself explains the acceptance of elephant as a symbol of life force and conceiving a child. The dream of Mahamaya, the mother of Lord Buddha corroborates this idea. Her dream of the white elephant entering her womb is linked to the Vedic myth of Indra and *Airavata*. The earliest depiction of elephant in art of historical period has been found at a place Dhauli near ancient Kalinga in Odisha.¹ Here, an elephant carved out of solid rock has been shown coming out from the cloud. There is an inscription near the image. It depicts 'gajatame' meaning the best of the elephant. Again it is indicative to *Airavata*. Interestingly, one of the Ashokan capitals found of Sankisha in Uttar Pradesh has an elephant figure. This elephant symbolizes Buddha's entry into the mundane world as

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Gautama Sidhartha. Invariably, on both the four lion capitals found at Sarnath and Sanchi on their abacus elephant is represented. Its movement in every depiction symbolizes the constant movement of the divine life force. Furthermore, elephant seated back to back that form a '*Chatusgajasamghata*' (four elephants' group) is prominently carved as relief figure at '*Torana*' of Sanchi. In the entire realm of the Buddhist art elephant symbolizing water cosmology, power of procreation and emanation of a divine force as embryonic Sidhartha has a supreme position as an art motif.

The dominant repertoire of Buddhism gave impetus to Brahmanical art and philosophy, where elephant has been represented in different ways with different meaning. Among these representations, elephant with its tusks and trunk forming the '*gajatorana*' (temple gate way) is very fascinating. This '*torana*' is found almost in the entire northern Indian region that have Nagara style of temples. Again, this motif signifies the flow of sacred water through the *torana* having trunk of a tree and floriated design on the top.

The socle of the Brahmanical temple having apsidal form is often called '*gajapristha*', the back of the celestial elephant. The apsidal form is a mix of rectangular and circular layout. Here, the rectangular form represents the four quarters of the world and circular design is a symbol of the elliptical universe. In this way the '*gajapristha*' formation as a geometrical form that represents the cosmos in terms of its form and four directions.² The socle of a Vesara temple is also called '*Kunjara*'. '*Kunjara*' means also elephant. The platform on that temple is erected is called '*Kunjara*' because elephant in India has been called royal mount. A temple is just not the abode of the God, but also his body.³ God is the king of the universe. Therefore, elephant forming the socle of the temple is vehicle of the God, the '*Virata Purusha*' who dwells in the sanctum sanctorum of the shrine. The socle (*adhishthana*) of the temple has '*gajapattika*' friezes of elephant & involved in different works. Some of the temples have large figures of elephant made on the socle. This formation is called *gajathara*'.

The greatest rock cut shrine of India, the Kailash temple, Ellora has a good number of elephant figures that decorate the socle of this temple. This temple is also known for one of its most attractive image of '*Jalabhisheka Lakshmi*'. A visitor entering the shrine may see this unique image beautifully carved out on the front wall of the *Nandimandpa*. The image shows the Goddess of wealth, Lakshmi seated on the lotus seat in '*padmasana*' posture.⁴ There have been shown two young elephants pouring water on the Goddess Lakshmi. These are celestial elephants. In this figure also elephant is related to down pour on the earth. In fact, the figure of Lakshmi, in this carving may be interpreted as '*Krishni Lakshmi*', the Goddess of agricultural wealth. In this way elephant is just not a symbol of progeny, but also of prosperity. The offering of water on Lakshmi is also part of purificatory ritual and

¹ Gupta, S.P., 1980 *Roots of Indian Art*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, p. 43.

² Kramrisch, Stella, 1976 *The Hindu Temple, Vol. I*, Motilal Banarsidas Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, pp. 51-90.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 73-84.

⁴ Deshpande, M.N., 1988 '*Kailash: A Study in its Symbolism in the Light of Contemporary Philosophical Concepts and Tradition*' in Parimoo, Ratan, Kannal, Deepak & Pannikar, Shivaji, *Ellora Caves : Sculptures and Architecture*, Books & Books Publishers, New Delhi, p. 238.

symbolically a boon being offered to the devotee who is visiting the shrine. The water being carried by elephant is sacred water. It is in real sense the nectarious over flow of the divine power responsible for sustenance of life.

The worship of Lakshmi in ritual and temple tradition is associated with elephant headed God Ganesh or Ganapati. Ganapati is an agrarian deity. He is perceived as a community leader and protector of the public wealth. The head of the God is that of an elephant. The head of elephant is a symbol of a pretentious mind having profound and prolific knowledge. It is an attribute without that no one can be a community leader and saviour of his people.

Contrary to these motifs, symbols and figures, elephant has been represented in a different way in the temple art of Odisha. There in all major temples elephant can be seen as being trampled by lion. This figure is known as '*Gajakrantaka Simha*'.⁵ It is philosophically a very powerful symbolic representation in an art form. In this figure elephant represents the darkness that covered the whole universe before evolution of the cosmos, while lion is a symbol of wisdom and action. It is believed that within the brain-box of an elephant a special type of pearl called '*Gaja mukta*' is formed. Perceptually, the lion is trying to take out that pearl. In real sense it is a quest to find out the spiritual jewel by wisdom and action. This figure has been interpreted differently.

According to some scholars here the lion overpowering an elephant symbolizes the victory of the Keshari dynasty over the Gajapati rulers. It should rightly be quoted that *Keshari* means lion and *Gajapati* stands for elephant. However, it is difficult to say that the political connotation of this figure is a historical reality.

There are various other figures of elephants shown in different theological and hagiographical context represented in religious art of India. The story of an elephant that was a devotee of Vishnu, was once grasped by a crocodile. He prayed the lord for rescuing him. Finally, Lord Vishnu appeared and saved his life. This image called *Gajendramoksha* forms a popular scene in the Vaishnava shrine of Deogarh of Gupta period.⁶ In this figure, the elephant symbolizes utmost dedication and devotion. Therefore, elephant as an animal motif in Indian art has different connotations in philosophical and spiritual context.

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⁵ Behra, K.S., 1996 *The Heritage of Mankind, Religion, History and Architecture, Vol. I*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, p. 62.

⁶ Agrawal, V.S., 1995 *Studies in Indian Art*, Viswavidyalaya Publication, Varanasi, p. 222.

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