

An Elephant (Gaja) in Ancient Indian Art- A Preliminary Survey

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Introduction

The elephant is a symbol of strength, stability, size and protection. In the world there are two types of elephants found 1. African (*Laxodonta*). 2. Asian (*Elephas*). Compared to the Asian elephant, the African elephant is bigger in size. His ears, tusks are also bigger than those of Asian elephants. Elephants prefer to live in dense forests. His favorite diet is bamboo, grass, sugar cane, maize etc. He eats early in the morning and takes rest in the afternoon. Elephants consume 150 kg of food everyday and 150 -200 liter of water per day. The average weight of an elephant is 5 to 6 tons. But they can run fast whenever it requires. The life span of elephants is about 120 years but many elephants end life before that age limit. Elephants live in herds. In a herd, there is one male elephant and the others are females and cubs. After 20-22 months of a gestation period, the female elephant gives birth to one or two cubs. The elephant eye sight is very weak but their listening and sniffing ability is much more developed. Elephants like to play in water. The death of elephants comes because of falling from mountains, falling in deep wells, trapped in wild fire or very deep mud and marsh, by lightning or killed by tiger, lion or separation from the mother in childhood etc.

In the Asian sub-continent, the elephant is found in countries like Bangladesh , Cambodia, china, India, Indonesia, Myanmar (Bramhadesh), Nepal and Sri Lanka. From the ancient period, the elephant has been a friend of humans. The wild elephant became a pet and helped humans to push or pull heavy loads like stone or wood. After urbanization, elephants were used in transport and in war. In a war along with horse and camels one of the important animals was the elephant. His strength and size used to weak enemies' power and their fighting capability. When King Alexander attacks India in 4th century B.C. he was very much worried about fighting Indian elephants who took part in the war. On one of the coins of King Alexander he shows riding a horse fighting with King Porus who is riding an elephant. King Chandragupta Maurya had presented 500 elephants to Greek satrap Selucus Niketor .The importance of elephants in wars and battles came to an end because of the discovery of long range fire arms. Despite this situation, the capture of elephants went on for their use in the field of entertainment such as joy ride, circus shows, hunting games, elephant fights like dadagiri or sathmari. Kingdoms like Mysore, Baroda state were famous for elephant stables. In spite of the legal ban, the killing of elephants continued for the precious tusks known as ivory which is used for making the handles of swords, daggers, walking sticks, mirrors and decorative objects like trays, boxes, table tops, chess pieces. Elephants in captivity are put to a variety of uses like carrying heavy loads/ pulling

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putting them, participating in royal or religious processions, pulling gun carriages, participating actively in the wars/fights, engaging for breaking or open strong sturdy gates/ walls of forts, taking heavy arms and other materials across the mountains , crossing rivers etc. (Wakankar, 2006:28,52).

Because of the elephant's good qualities and habits, he got an important position in ancient Indian art and literature like *purana*, *kavya*, epics , etc. In *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, there is one special chapter on elephants called Gajamtya prakaran. In the medieval period around 11 – 12 century A.D. *Hastyayurveda* written by Palkapya deals only with the medical treatment of elephants, body details, daily or seasonal care, feedings, treatment on various diseases, pregnancy , etc. Another book titled *Matang lila* (Elephant sport) deals with the method of catching wild elephants, feeding and tending them, guiding them with voice, hook, stick, good and bad points of elephants, their castes, keeping and care in stables and marks of character (Edgerton , 1931).

In the 16th century A.D. *AIN-I-AKBARI* written by Abu- l- Fazl mentions includes a chapter on royal elephants which narrates about stables, classification, food, servant, harness, riding on elephants (Blochmann, 1965:123 to139).

The elephant has a very important position in Hindu-Bauddha-Jaina religion. Elephant is a *vahana* or a carrier of God king Indra. The elephant was a flag symbol of Kaurva king Karna and Duryodhana in the great *Mahabhart* war. The elephant is one of the jewels to come from sea churning (*Samudra Manthana*) by Gods and Asuras. He is called *Airavata* a white elephant who became a carrier of Indra the king of Gods and also the God of rain. The elephant attracts black clouds which is full of water and then Indra makes them rain on earth so the black clouds are called elephants. The elephant was an ancient symbol of water cosmology. He is connected with Sri Laxmi, with *yakshas* and *yakshis* as a vehicle (Coomaraswamy, 1971:II:32). The elephant is associated with the goddess of wealth Laxmi called who is called *gaja-laxmi*. In this sculpture two elephants are pouring water from *kumbha*, a pot, on Goddess Laxmi.

Elephant is symbol of Buddha in Buddhist religion. Because When Queen Maya Buddha's mother at the time of Buddha's birth dreams a white elephant entering in her womb. In ancient period elephant festivals were celebrated. They were called as a 'Hastimangal' which are mentioned in Buddhist jataka tales like 'Mati posaka jataka', 'Susim jataka' (Gupta, 1983:11). In Jaina dharma elephant is a vahana of 2nd jina Ajitnatha. Elephant headed human God is very much famous in Asian countries because of his worship he can save humans from any kind of dangers. That is the faith on him. He is called as a Ganesha or Ganapati.

Above discussion shows how elephant is in very much important position in ancient Indian society, dharma, literature and even in everyday life. Which is reflected in Art through various mediums from Indus civilization period 2500 B.C, to Gupta period (4th cen A.D.) and this is going to be seen in this research paper. There are already ample studies on pre historic period cave paintings and coin symbols. To avoid repeat evidences, both these sections are not covered in this research paper.

Elephant in Ancient Indian Art

Indus civilization (2500 B.C. to 1500 B.C.) period

In Indus civilization art Asian elephant depiction comes on terracotta seal found from excavations sites like Harappa (Vats,1975:I:322) along with Indus script. Terracotta elephant figures are also found from Harappa (Ibid:308).

Mohenjodaro excavation received some terracotta seals depicted the elephant with Indus script (Marshall: 1973:I:70). One depiction comes on a copper tablet (Ibid:III).

Chanhu daro excavation also found a elephant depiction on terracotta seals and elephant terracotta figures (Mackay,1943:147, 159).

From Lothal (Gujrat, India) one terracotta sealing was found which had a depiction of an elephant with Indus script (Rao,1972:95).

Chalcolithic (1500 to 1000 B.C.) period

Bronze elephant figure recovered from Daimabad (state-Maharashtra) excavation. It is a standing posture figure . All parts are properly shown. It is on one platform which has four holes on four corners for attaching wheels (Sali, 1986:478).

Megalithic (1000 to 800 B.C.) period

Bronze figure of elephant found in megalithic burial excavation at Adichannalur (State-Tamilnadu). It is in standing position at middle of circular platform (Rea,1915:12).

In Indus civilization art elephant carving on terracotta seals with his feeding tray and cloth on his back shows he is tamed and very much familiar in everyday life. At present the climate condition of Indus civilization area is not suitable for animals like elephant and rhino but in 2500 B. C., that area was full of vegetation and grass so these big animals can survive. That is why the depiction of those big animals comes on seals. In Chalcolithic and megalithic period art elephant depiction comes as example. Bronze figure of elephant found in this period is a very good specimen of metal carving. Elephant figure found from burial shows close association of elephant and human being after death.

Early Historic (800 to 400 B.C.) period

Archaeological excavations from Nasik (State- Maharashtra), sonpur (State-Bihar), Vaishali-Kaushambi-Hastinapura, Sravasti-Mathura-Sonkh(State-Uttar Pradesh) recovered Terracotta figures of elephants. Some of them are ornamented and painted. From Maheshwar Navdatoli (State-Madhya Pradesh) excavations a square shape glass seal was found which has a carving of an elephant.

He is in a standing posture. His trunk is in an up right position. Swastika and Taurin symbol are carved on the seal with elephant. (Sankalia, 1958:220).

These terracotta figures found in various excavations suggest either they are made for worship or as a toy for entertainment. The glass seal has some religious significance because of the association of swastika figure and taurine symbol carving along with the elephant.

Maurya-Sunga (400 to 200 B.C.) period

In Maurya period elephant depiction comes on King Asoka stone pillar capital from Sankisa (State- Uttar Pradesh). His ears and legs are visible but head and tail are broken (Agrawala, 1965:97). At Kalsi elephant figure is carved with bramhi script letters (Ibid: 91). At Dhauli (State-Odisha) unfinished elephant sculpture is carved. His front portion of body parts like trunk, tusk, ear, front legs are visible. On same rock one of famous epigraph of King Asoka is carved in bramhi script. The subject of this rock edict is King Asoka Kalinga victory (Ray, 1975:27). Lomas Risi cave of Maurya period has a carving of row of elephants coming to worship Buddhist stupa on façade (Agrawala, 1965: 93). Barhut stupa is one of the best example of carving animal world . Especially elephant carving is very beautiful and is perfected by the artist. Barhut stupa sculptures are now preserved in Indian museum, kolkata (State-West Bengal). Here elephant comes with ornamentation and a rider, in a jungle scene enjoying bath in a lake or in gaja laxmi sculpture. Elephant depiction comes in jataka tale sculptures such as Lava jataka, Chaddanta jataka, Vessantara jataka, Matiposaka jataka, Nag or Karkataka jataka. Sanchi stupa (State-Madhya Pradesh) also has a depiction of elephants in various postures. He is part of a religious procession, as a load bearer, as a part of army, in a jungle scene along with other animals.

Bodhgaya stupa elephant depiction comes as a animal in nature , in jataka story of Kasava jataka (Barua, 1934:II:93,96).

Murtaziganj (State-Bihar) recovered carved 22 stone discs of Mauryan period. On some of the discs elephant is carved along with other animals such as Horse, lion, deer, dog etc and birds like Hamsa, cock, peacock. All these animals and birds are carved with nude mother goddess figures and palm trees (Shere, 1951:179). Exactly we do not know the association of mother goddess and palm tree with animals and birds on stone discs but this might be related to some fertility ritual .

At Amaravati stupa (State-Andhra Pradesh) elephant carving comes in various subjects. As animal in nature, fighting with lion, paying homage to Bodhi tree, in the Queen Maya's dream (Burgess, 1970:27,28,29,34,35).

Buddhist caves carved in Maurya-sunga period at Bhaja, Bedsa, Thanale, Pitalkhora (all in State-Maharashtra) has a depiction of elephant in various forms like standing, sitting posture . They are carved ornamented or plain. Sometimes on pillar capital or in a base of cave to support the huge structure with his huge strength. Sometimes they are with rider couples on there back.

Terracotta figurines of elephants from Maurya – Sunga period are found in archaeological excavations like Kaushambi, Mathura, Nevasa, Pataliputra, Purana Quila, Taxila. Some of them are painted and ornamented and part of the body is missing like trunk, legs, tail, ears. From Taxila on one copper ring one elephant figure is carved (Marshall, 1975:II:647). From Tamluk (State-West Bengal) on one Terracotta cake four elephants carved pulling a carriage (Biswas, 1981:182). On another Terracotta cake catching wild elephant scene is carved (Ibid:181).

Udaygiri-Khandgiri cave complex of 1st cen. B.C (State-Odisha) has a good amount of elephant depiction in a variety of subjects (Mohapatra, 1981:124,125).

Lucknow, Mathura and Patna museums have a collection of Terracotta figures of elephants from Maurya-Sunga period. One of the best examples is from Rajghat. Here on one Terracotta cake circus scene is engraved. In this scene one elephant is driving a chariot which has four elephants attached (Agrawala, 1953:82). This shows that in Maurya-Sunga period, elephants were used for entertainment. They were tamed and educated to entertain people.

Terracotta figurines of elephants from Sunga-Satvahana period found at excavations from Bhokardhan, Kaundinyapur, Ter, Pauni (All in State-Maharashtra).

From Kolhapur (State-Maharashtra), one fine bronze figure of elephant in seating position with riders was found. This depiction is very much similar to Nasik, Karle, Kanheri rock cut caves elephant sculpture carving (Dhavalikar, 2004:92).

Kusana (1st -2nd cen A.D.) Period

Along with Terracotta figurines of elephants from excavated sites like Kaushambi, Kumrahar, Mathura, Sonkh, Vaisali and Nevasa, we have some examples in different mediums and contexts in Kusana period.

From Chandraketugarh, one Terracotta figure of Yaksha is found. He is holding an elephant in his left hand (Biswas, 1981:188).

Sirkap (Taxila) has recovered one elephant shape bead made from steatite (Beck, 1941:55).

Kankali Tila (Mathura) a Jaina stupa excavation elephant depiction comes in sculpture as a ornamentation.

Buddhist caves from Junnar, Nasik, Karle, Kanheri, Shelarwadi elephant is carved on pillar capital or at base.

At Amaravati Stupa elephant is carved as an animal in nature, paying homage to Buddha, used for transport purpose etc. First depiction of Elephant headed yaksha can be seen at Amaravati stupa in 2nd cen B.C. (Burgess, 1970:66). After the depiction comes in Kusana period sculpture from Mathura (Agrawala, 1950:140-141)

In Gandhara sculptures elephant is one of the most liked animal by sculptors (Krishnamurty,1977:119)

From Chandraketurgarh evidence of God Indra riding on elephant (Airvata) found in Terracotta figure (Biswas, 1981:159).

Gupta (3rd -4th cen A.D.) period

Elephant depicted at Nagarjunakonda, Ghantasala, Goli (All in State-Andhra Pradesh) in sculptures mainly in jataka story scenes such as Vessantara jataka, Chaddanta jataka and in war scenes, royal processions and as one of the royal emblems with the king along with other seven jewels like wheel, horse, women etc.

Terracotta figurines of elephant from gupta period are found at Sonkh, Mathura, Kumrahar, Sambar,Shrungverpur, Taxila and Amreli.

At Yelleswaram excavation elephant is painted on piece of pot is recovered. Walking elephant with properly shown trunk is clearly visible (Khan,1963:32).

Two Terracotta sealings of Gaja laxmi carvings are found at Vaisali excavation.(Sinha & Roy,1969:128,129).

Sirsukh (Taxila) has recovered elephant shape bead made from carnelian (Beck,1941:55).

Rock cut caves Bagh (State-Madhya Pradesh), Kuda (State- Maharashtra) has a elephant depiction in sculptures.

At World Heritage site Ajanta caves (State-Maharashtra) elephant comes in various paintings with different context in cave no.1, 2 and 17. Especially in Jataka story painting like Chhadanta jataka, Mati posaka jataka he has given good attention . He is also shown as a part of army or in a jungle scene in a herd.

Conclusion

From North to South and East to West elephant keeps company in ancient Indian Art especially in stone sculptures in various periods and in different contexts. Each of these representation is impressive in its own way for exam- Indus clay seals, metal figure from chalcolithic period, Barhut-Sanchi-Amaravati stupa sculptures which has a depiction of Jataka tales like Chaddanta jataka, Vessantara jataka. Elephant themes at these stupa are not confined to the jataka stories. They are paying homage to the stupa, worshipping Bodhi tree, there is a portrayal of elephants bathing in a pool and above all some mighty specimens supporting the structure like architrave, pillars, cave etc. On all these monuments, elephant carving is a great combination of technical skill and psychological insight into mood and atmosphere. The artist have treated their subjects with such a absolute command on

material which they chosen. Every details of the elephants anatomy is brought out . No two animals are quite alike. Each has been awarded a distinctive individuality. They can be seen in an endless diversity of gesture and attitude like bending, crouching , kneeling, reclining , sprawling in pool, standing erect rock like , carrying upon there broad backs mans-women, gods, animals etc. Advancing majestically in the fore front of a procession.

Elephant is a symbol of Majesty, power , dignity. His self sacrificial quality is shown in ‘chhadanta jataka’ which is depicted on both Barhut and Amaravati stupa sculptures. Indian continent is a land of elephants. The tribute offered to the Asian elephant in Ancient Indian Art is as deep and sincere as in literature. Every conceivable material has been utilized to glorify this mighty guardian of royalty, this gentle benefactor of the common man . We have elephant depiction in clay, stone , metal, semi precious stones, painting, ivory.

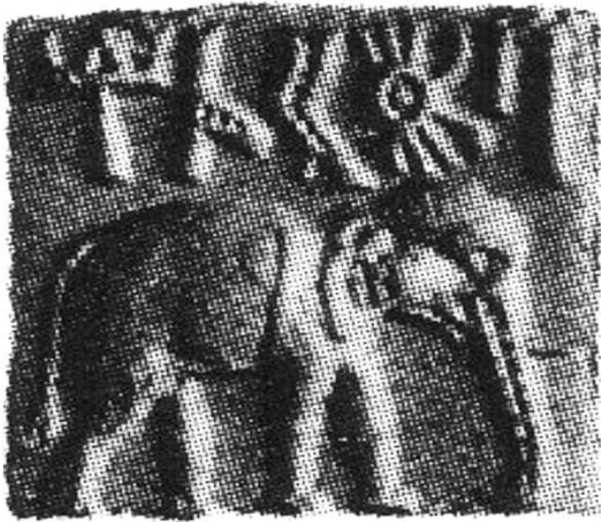
The above discussion shows that elephant depiction in Ancient Indian art from Indus civilization (2500 B.C.) to Gupta (4th cen A.D) and onwards comes in various mediums and different contexts. Elephant can be seen in on Terracotta seals, Terracotta figurines, metal figurines, stone sculptures in Maurya-Sunga- Satvahana period. In Kushna period elephant can be seen in different medium of art such as semi precious stone. In Gupta –Vakataka period he comes in wall painting of Ajanta caves. . In all the above mentioned mediums of art, elephant comes with a natural or religious background or as an entertainer or beads as an amulet with some charms , as a vahana or carrier, as part of jataka story narration on stupas like Barhut, Sanchi, Amaravati etc.. After Gupta (4th cen A.D.) period elephant depiction comes on different temples in all over India. Elephant has a important role in Indian Temple Art and Architecture .Because of his strength he carries weight of temple on his back so his depiction comes on the base of temples called as Gaja-thara or row of mighty elephants or elephant band. Even he plays a role of guardian of temples or caves . The band of elephants can be seen on the base of Pitalkhora , karla and Ellora Kailasa cave which symbolically carries huge weight of cave . The same tradition continues in temple art onwards Gupta period which can be observed in 12th cen. Bhumija style temples or in Dravida, Nagara style or in Odisha style temple architecture.

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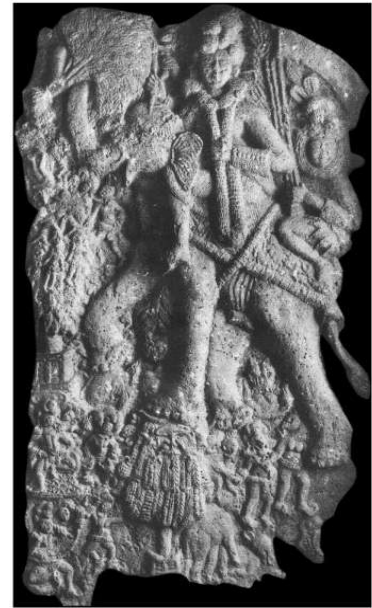
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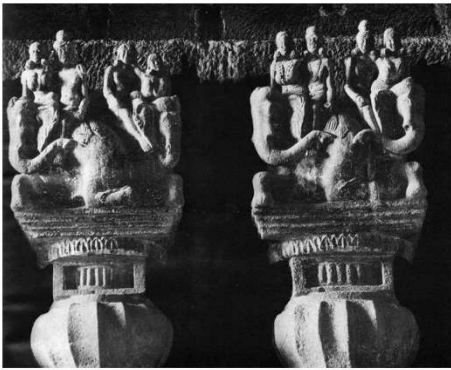
PL.1 A



A Terracotta seal , Indus period , Harrappa.



B Sculpture –Maurya Period, Bhaja caves.



C Pillar Capital- 1st cen.A.D., Karla caves



D Pillar Capial-1st cen.A.D. ,Nasik caves



E Sculpture-Maurya period, Pitalkhora caves



F
Bronze Figure-Satvahana period, Kolhapur



A
Stone Sculpture- Maurya Period, Barhut stupa

PL.1B



B
Stone Sculpture- Gaja Laxmi, Maurya period, Barhut stupa



C
Stone Sculpture-Queen Maya Dream, Maurya Period, Barhut stupa

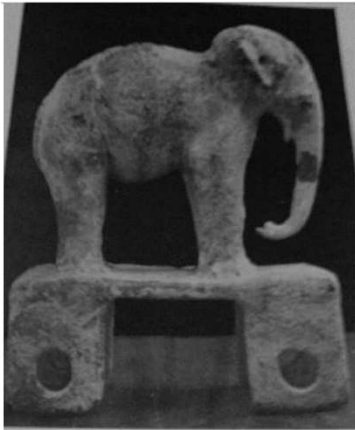


D
Stone Sculpture-Procession of elephant by monkeys, Maurya period, Barhut stupa



E
Stone Sculpture- Removing teeth with the help of elephant, Maurya period , Barhut stupa

PL.1 C



A Bronze Figure- Chalcolithic period, Daimabad



B Glass seal- Early Historic period, Navdatoli



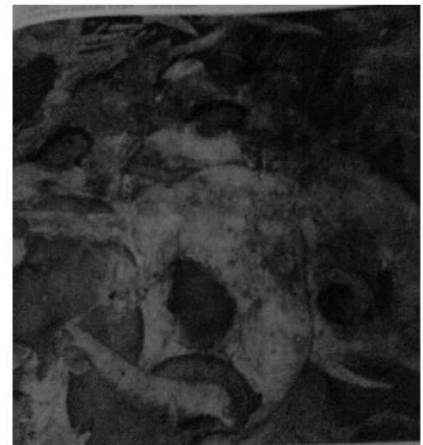
C Terracotta cake- Sunga period, Rajghat



D Terracotta Figure- Maurya period, Buxer



E Wall Painting-Gupta period, Ajanta cave no.1



F Wall Painting-Gupta period, Ajanta cave no.1