

Depiction of Elephants in the Architecture of Rashtrapati Bhavan by Lutyens

Rosy Gupta¹

The elephant is one of the most loved animal. It is a symbol for strength and wisdom. Elephants have influenced the life of man from prehistoric times. Its representations on ivory, bones and cave paintings prove that it was an important factor in the life of prehistoric man. Elephants found respectable place in Indian art also.

The war scenes of reliefs of Sanchi, Bharhut and Amravati and paintings of Ajanta also depict elephants occasionally. They have been depicted in Indian architecture as temple bearers.

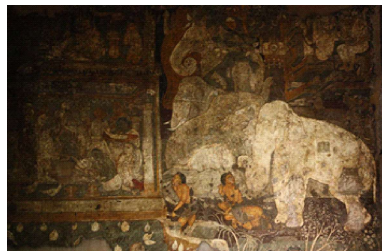


fig. 1 A Painting of Ajanta depicting Elephants

The paper will discuss the depiction of elephants by Edwin Landseer Lutyens in the architecture of Rashtrapati Bhavan or the President House of India, which was known as Government House or Viceroy's House during British Rule. Lutyens was selected by the British Government as the Chief Architect for designing the capital of New Delhi. The architecture of this place is very interesting and fascinating, it is a combination of Indo-European styles. Many animal figurines have been introduced by Lutyens in the architecture of Rashtrapati Bhavan but most prominently he had introduced elephants in various locations across the place.

In letters to his wife, Lutyens mentioned the difficult reconnaissance trip by elephant when searching for the most favourable location of the new capital of the Raj, members of Delhi Town Planning Committee were allocated elephants in absence of street passable for vehicles.

¹ Rashtrapati Bhavan, India

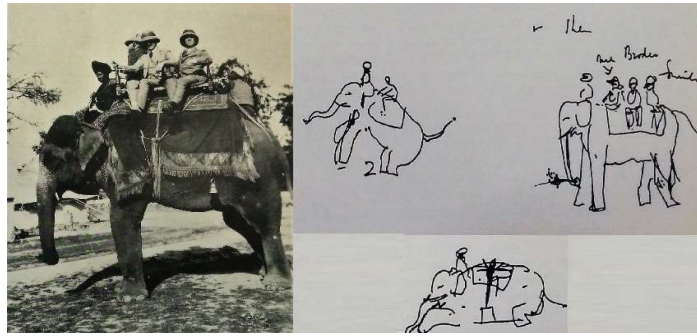


Fig. 1 Lutyens on an elephant with members of Town Planning Committee on the left & Lutyens' cartoons/sketches of the same on the right

Most of the elephant figurines have been carved in stone on the main entrance of President House, they seem to guard the entrance, their importance extends far more than their present-day use as a working animal, and Lutyens understood their importance in Indian mythology.

The concept of elephant as a jewel of the *Chakravartin* is not of the ordinary elephant but of a celestial one which brings luck and abundance to the king and his kingdom.



fig.2 Elephants carved in stone installed at the main entrance of Rashtrapati Bhavan

Elephant images used in seals have been found in the historic city of Mohenjo-Daro. From Indus Valley age up to the Maurya period elephant cult continued to exist. All Ashokan pillars were surmounted by animal figurine capitols only. Among them Sankisa pillar is found surmounted with an elephant image.

Moreover, attention may be drawn to the dhvajya mentioned in Mahabharata, where the banners of the heroes were described with the animal figures. The dhvaja of Karna and Duryodhana was adorned by a bejewelled elephant. Probably inspired by all these facts of Indian mythology Lutyens had used thirty eight elephant figurine in stone to guard the main entrance of the Viceroy's House. Another ideology behind this is probably the myth of Hastayurveda, the role of elephants is defined for the king and his empire: "If they did not pay worship to the elephant, the king and the kingdom, the army and the elephants, would be doomed to perish, because a divinity would have been disregarded. Contrariwise, if due worship is paid to the elephant, they will thrive and prosper together with their wives and sons, the country, the army, and the elephant. Crops will sprout in due time; Indra, the rain god, will send rain in due time; there will be no plague, no drought. They will live a hundred years (a full

lifetime) with many sons and many cattle and will have a sturdy progeny. Whoever, Wishes to have sons will have sons, and longing after riches and other goods will also be fulfilled. The earth will abound in treasures of precious metals and jewels”¹



fig.2 Close-up of the carved stone Elephants at the entrance of Rashtrapati Bhavan



fig. 1 Sankisa pillar surmounted with an elephant image



fig. 3 Mohenjo Daro Seal depicting Elephant

The usefulness of elephant, especially in the arid subtropical landscape of northern India is ultimately looked to its descent; “Elephants are clouds sentenced to walk upon earth. But their cousins like to visit them; hence it is important for a king to have elephants in his stables. They are termed as ‘the king’s clouds’ and they guarantee rain for his people in the period of monsoon,”²

Another concept for choice of elephants by Lutyens was that elephants are identified with clouds, the word Naga have both the meaning. Thus the clouds or elephants bring wealth and prosperity

¹ Andandasrama Hastyayurveda, Sanskrit Series No. 26, Poona 1894, quoted in Zimme, H., op, cit.,p.108

² H Zimmer: The art of Indian Asia, New York 1955 and 1964, p.161, Vol.1.

(Sri) in the form of crops in the fields. The relationship of clouds with Sri is very well explained in Mahabharata where at one place it is said that she lives in maidens, sacrifices, rain-clouds, lakes filled with lotus flowers, royal thrones and also in elephants. This close association with Sri made the elephant a symbol of life and generative force as well as of prosperity or abundance. Association of elephants with waters paved the ground for his association with Indra and the concept that he brings water for rain from the seas. According to the Mahabharata, after taking birth from the celestial water along with the other ratnas it was adopted by Indra as his vehicle (vahana). This legend is directly connected with the rain, fertility of land and production of crops.

Thus, the stone elephants that Lutyens provided for entrance to Viceroy's House had a double meaning for him. First as relatives of clouds, they ensured the fertility of the land, and secondly as caryatids of the universe they supported the Ruling British Empire.

The fascination that elephants exerted on Lutyens was also reflected in many of his travel sketches and in fantasy tales of his children: "I went for a ride on an Indian dancing horse and was getting along quite nicely until we met a huge elephant and the horse shied and so I nearly came off. Then it swung around, galloped away, and –horror-I found the elephant after me and felt its hot breath between me and the saddle!! Just as I was getting home the elephant caught my horse's tail. But luckily for me the tail came off just as I got home."³

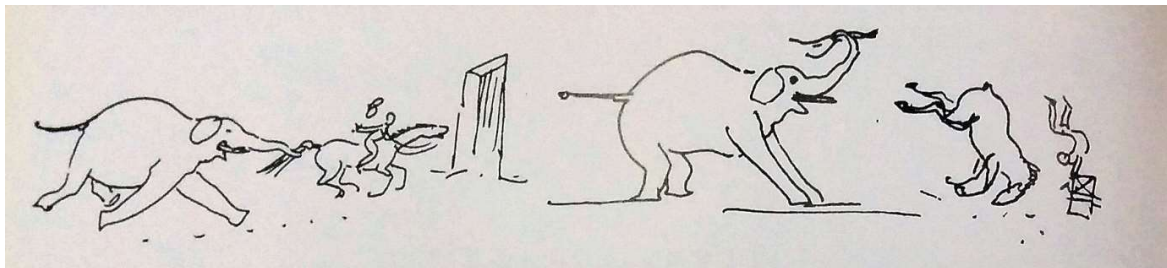


fig. 7 Cartoons/Travel Sketches of Elephants reflected by Lutyens in fantasy tales of his children

On the north and south sunken road entrances also Lutyens had introduced huge elegantly carved elephants in red sand stone, the canopies above them seem like howdahs. This can be compared with the elephant rows carrying the world mountain Meru at the Kailasha temple of Ellora. According to Butler who had described these sculptures most aptly, "Moreover emphasis was required to mark the entrance of the formal approach to the Jaipur column (an 44.2 metre column in the forecourt of President House designed by Lutyens); and the form of elephant thus used to redress the bluntness of a gap indicates that, though this was a British Government building, it was in India. The employment of India's largest and most venerated quadruped says so instantly."⁴

And it is rather more than a Lutyens joke. The sculpture is so well done. Judging from the records and drawings, it must have involved a great deal of trouble with the Sculptor-Charles Jagger and his assistants to make the lumbering mammal with its rich caparison melt so admirably into the

³ Quoted from Christopher Hussey:op.cit.

⁴ Butler,A.S.G.*The Architecture of Sir Edwin Lutyens*.Vol.2.Collab. George Stewart and Christopher Hussey.London:The University Press,1950.

austere architectural lines. As well, the details of both fit into each other-especially the break forward of the tilted parapet, suggesting a howdah. Its short length too thrust out with the pair of great tassels astride the elephant’s head clamps down the end of the parapet beyond the face of the retaining- wall; and this look of anchorage is completed by the trunk tautened to lift a weight. As the direction of these lines is at right angles to the main wall of the court, the flanks of the entrance to the lateral road get the extra importance they needed. It is a fine example of the happy use of the architectural sculpture of an elephant. Note on the north elevation of the corner how its outline on the right- though it takes the form of a draped covering-is vertical and flush with the wall face at C on the drawing; and how the very flat ellipse, outlining the body, comes within an inch of this. A loose and sloppy –trousered look, natural to an elephant, would have been out of place in this stone conjunction”⁵



fig.8 Elephant rows at the Kailasha Temple of Ellora

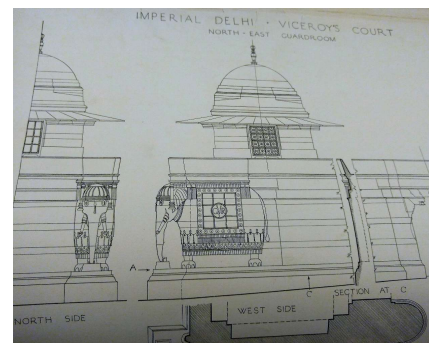


fig. 9 Architectural plan/drawing of North-East Guardroom with Elephant Structures



fig. 10 Actual photo of the Guardroom

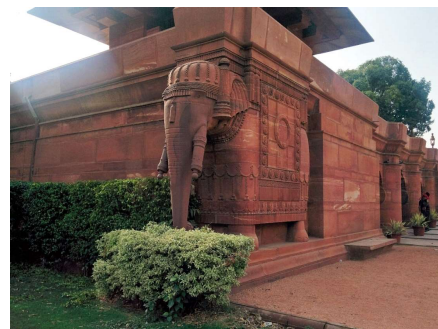


fig. 11 Photograph from another angle

Lutyens had also designed elephant motif in the cast-iron fire back which was used in a bedroom in the south-east wing. This is illustrated in the figure below and the creature there is so natural as to have picked one of the flowers from the decoration underneath it.

A pair of free standing elephants were to greet visitors on the slope to the ‘power plateau’ occupied by both the presidential office and the secretariat blocks. The elephants were to be similar to those en route to the forecourt. Unfortunately those elephants structures were never installed.

⁵ Butler, A.S.G. *The Architecture of Sir Edwin Lutyens*. Vol.2. Collab. George Stewart and Christopher Hussey. London: The University Press, 1950. p.41

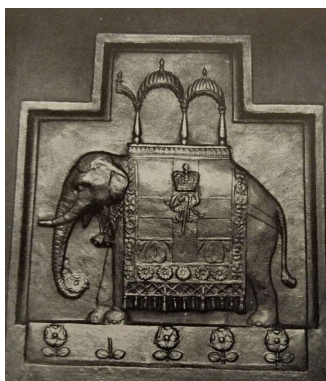


fig.12 Elephant Motif in the Cast-Iron Fireback

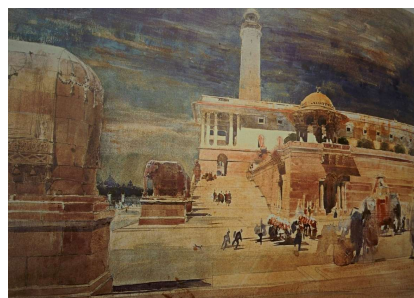


fig. 13 A Water Color Painting by William Walcot of the Secretariat Blocks showing proposed elephants

The elephant also frequently appears in Lutyens' drawings and sketches, and he transformed its benign solidity most effectively in his architecture.

Lutyens had also introduced elephant motifs in teakwood panelling on the walls of State Banquet Hall of the President House. The embellishments of wood in the form of elephant trunks cover the length of the panelling in a regular spacing pattern as shown in figure below.

A detail of the cornice shows Lutyens' fascination for elephants. His love of detailing and his inventiveness can be seen when he inverts this motif & turns it into the legs of the dining room consoles.



fig. 14 Lutyens' drawings of & sketches of Elephants

Other examples are the procession paintings on the side walls of Ashoka Hall which depict the King's procession going on elephants, horses and camels. The paintings of Ashoka Hall known as State Ball Room in the Vice Regal period is adorned by these paintings in fresco style which were done by an Italian painter, Collonello with the help of twelve Indian painters, probably inspired by the fact that the elephants not only guard the palace as symbols of strength but they are also regular fixture in all great processions of India whether religious or political.

Another interesting example is the Pergola or the shaded device made of red sandstone used in the Mughal Garden of President House by Lutyens. In the structure he created a statically

balanced system of short beams that were procured in balance by decorated stone weights, which resemble the trunk of the elephants.



fig. 15 On the top left, architectural drawing of elephant motif, on top right, the elephants motifs on teak wood panelling & in the bottom the entire picture of the State Banquet Hall



fig.16: Paintings on the walls of Ashoka Hall by Collonello depicting Elephants

The making of this pergola is described by the Butler as, “This pergola at Delhi had the scale of empire, Lutyens’ conception of this form grew from the constraint that the sandstone beams were only available in lengths of about 3.6 meters (12 feet). Using his design ingenuity, he divided the span into three, then added stylized elephant trunks on the cantilevered beams to counterweigh the rafter above. From the side, the pergola stands like a row of elephants outside a south Indian temple. Today it is flanked by sixteen rose beds encased by low hedges.”⁶

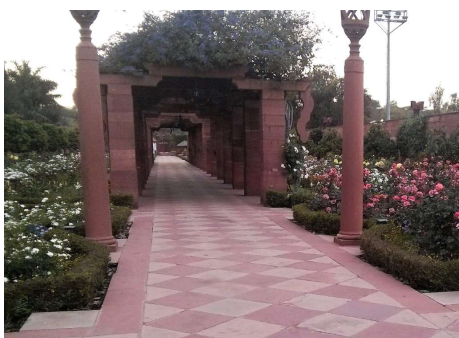


fig. 17 Present Day photo of Pergola at the Mughal Gardens, Rashtrapati Bhavan

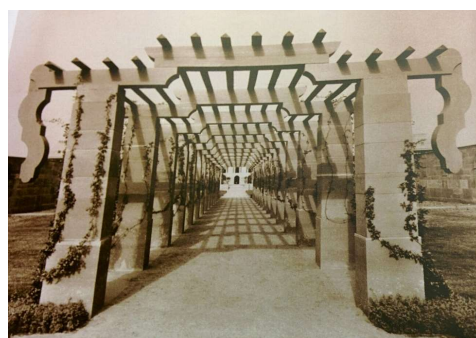


fig. 18 Old photograph of the Pergola

In the President’s Library earlier known as The Viceroy’s Library, Lutyens had again used elephant trunk motifs of marble above both sides of the paintings installed above the fire places of the library.

⁶ Butler, A.S.G. *The Architecture of Sir Edwin Lutyens*. Vol.2. Collab. George Stewart and Christopher Hussey. London: The University Press, 1950.

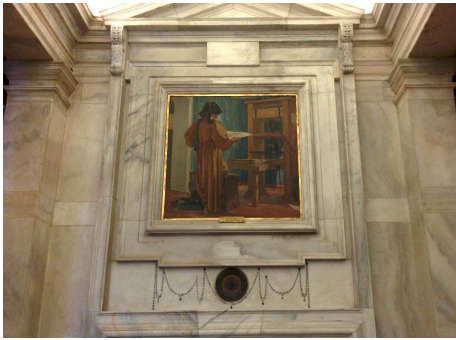


fig.19 Elephant Trunk Motifs above both sides of the painting installed above the West fireplace



fig.20 Elephant Trunk Motifs above both sides of the painting installed above the East fireplace

Lutyens' partner, Herbert Baker, who designed the Secretariat Blocks in front of Rashtrapati Bhavan had also introduced elephant motifs in his architecture, for example elephants support the roofs of his pavilions & domes of the Secretariat Blocks.

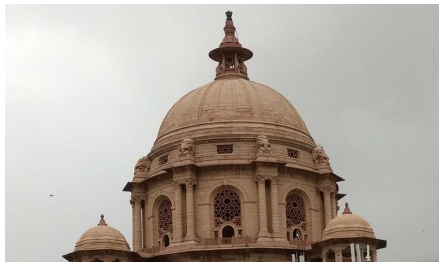


fig. 21 Elephant Motifs on the dome of North Block of the Secretariat Buildings

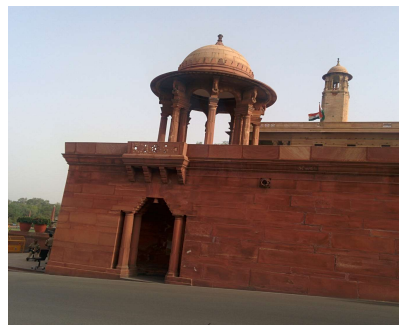


fig. 22 Elephant Motifs on the pavilion of South Block of the Secretariat Buildings

Thus, it is clear from the above mentioned information and illustrations that elephants were a major part of the architecture of the Rashtrapati Bhavan (or the erstwhile Viceroy's House) & adjoining Secretariat Blocks. The main architect of the same Sir Edwin Lutyens was influenced by the importance of Elephant in the Indian Civilisation & thus extensively used elephant motifs/structures at various places of the building.

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Internet Sources for Illustrations

Figure 1: A Painting of Ajanta depicting elephants <http://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/unseen-ajanta/292587> (Assessed on July 2016)

Figure 4: Close up of the carved stone elephants on the entrance of the Rashtrapati Bhavan
<http://www.lutyenstrustexhibitions.org.uk/new-delhi-2/4581496461> (Assessed on July 2016)

Figure 5: Sankisa pillar surmounted with an elephant image
http://www.indianetzone.com/22/sankasya_buddhist_pilgrimage_center_buddha.htm (Assessed on July 2016)

Figure 6: Mohenjo daro Seal depicting elephant
<https://www.harappa.com/slide/seals-mohenjo-daro> (Assessed on July 2016)

Figure 8: Elephant rows at the Kailasa Temple of Ellora
<http://weburbanist.com/pics/rock-cut-architecture-ellora-caves/kailash-elephants-2/> (Assessed on July 2016)