

Representation of Elephant in Tribal Art and Culture of Central India

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Introduction

The Asian elephant appears in various religious traditions and mythologies. They are treated positively and are sometimes revered as deities, often symbolising strength and wisdom. Similarly, the African elephant is seen as the wise chief who impartially settles disputes among the forest creatures in African fables and the Ashanti tradition holds that they are human chiefs from the past.

The Earth is supported and guarded by mythical World Elephants at the compass points of the cardinal directions, according to the Hindu cosmology of ancient India. The classical Sanskrit literature also attributes earthquakes to the shaking of their bodies when they tire. Wisdom is represented by the elephant in the form of the deity Ganesh, one of the most popular gods in the Hindu religion's pantheon.

Sometimes known as Ganesha, this deity is very distinctive in having a human form with the head of an elephant. This was put on after the human head was either cut off or burned, depending on the version of the story from various Hindu sources. Lord Ganesha's birthday (rebirth) is celebrated as the Hindu festival known as Ganesha Chaturthi. In Japanese Buddhism, their adaptation of Ganesha is known as Kangiten ("Deva of Bliss"), often represented as an elephant headed male and female pair shown in a standing embrace to represent unity of opposites.

In Hindu iconography, many *devas* are associated with a mount or vehicle known as a *vāhana*. In addition to providing a means of transport, they symbolically represent a divine attribute. The elephant *vāhana* represents wisdom, divine knowledge and royal power~ it is associated with Lakshmi, Brihaspati, Shachi and Indra. Indra was said to ride on a flying white elephant named *Airavata*, who was made the King of all elephants by Lord Indra. A white elephant is rare and given special significance. It is often considered sacred and symbolises royalty in Thailand and Burma, where it is also considered a symbol of good luck. In Buddhist iconography, the elephant is associated with Queen Māyā of Sakya, the mother of Gautama Buddha. She had a vivid dream foretelling her pregnancy in which a white elephant featured prominently. To the royal sages, the white elephant signifies royal majesty and authority~ they interpreted the dream as meaning that her child was destined for greatness as a universal monarch or a *buddha*. Elephants remain an integral part of religion in South Asia and some are even featured in various religious practices. Temple elephants are specially trained captive

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elephants that are lavishly caparisoned and used in various temple activities. Among the most famous of the temple an elephant is Guruvayur Keshavan of Kerala, India. They are also used in festivals in Sri Lanka such as the Esala Perahera.

Asian cultures admire the high intelligence and good memory of Asian elephants. As such, they symbolise wisdom and royal power. They are used as a representative of various political parties such as United National Party of Sri Lanka and Bahujan Samaj Party of India. The Elephants of Kerala are an integral part of the daily life in Kerala, South India. These Indian elephants are loved, revered, groomed and given a prestigious place in the state's culture. There they are often referred to as the 'sons of the *sahya*.' The elephant is the state animal of Kerala and is featured on the emblem of the Government of Kerala. The elephant is also on the flag of the Kingdom of Laos with three elephants visible, supporting an umbrella until it became a republic in 1975.

Other Southeast Asian realms have also displayed one or more white elephants. The elephant can also be found in games. In shatranj, the medieval game from which chess developed, the piece corresponding to the modern bishop was known as *Pil* or *Alfil* ("Elephant"~ from Persian and Arabic respectively). In the Indian chaturanga game the piece is also called "Elephant" (*Gaja*). The same is true in Chinese chess which has an elephant piece the elephant serves as a defensive piece, being the only one that may not cross the river dividing the game board. In the Japanese shogi version, the piece was known as the "*Drunken Elephant*", However, it was dropped by order of the Emperor Go Nara and no longer appears in the version played in contemporary Japan. The elephant also lends its name to some landmarks in Asia. Elephanta Island (also called "Gharapuri Island") in Mumbai Harbour was given this name by 17th century Portuguese explorers who saw a monolithic basalt sculpture of an elephant near the entrance to what became known as the Elephanta Caves. The Portuguese attempted to take it home with them but ended up dropping it into the sea because their chains were not strong enough. Later, the British moved this elephant to the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Elephant in Tribal Art and Culture of Central India

The Central India consists of plateaus and mountainous belt between Indo-gangtic plain to the north and roughly to the Krishna River to the south. Because of its centrally location, it is often called as the 'Heart of India'. The largest numbers of tribes are in the states of Odisha. Madhya Pradesh is the 2nd largest state of India. Each of these tribes has its own identity and culture which varies greatly from each other. The tribes have their distinct socio-economic, cultural, political and religious institutions which are important part and parcel of cultural heritage of India. They have contributed immensely towards the history and culture of India. In the present paper, the tribal residing in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, south-eastern Rajasthan, northern Maharashtra, northern Telengana, northern Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand, southern Utter Pradesh and south-western West Bengal are considered as tribes of central India. The important tribes inhabiting in this zone are the Agaria, the Asur, the Baiga, the Bhils, the Bhuinya, the Bhumij, the Birhor, the Bondo, the Borida, the Gadava, the Ho, the Juang, the Kamar, the Katkari, the Kharia, the Kharia, the Kol, the Gonds, the Kondh, the Koraku, the Lodha, the Munda, the Muria, the Oraon, the Pardhan, the Santal / Santhal, the Savara etc.

Elephants have been the subject of various cultural depictions in mythology, symbolism and popular culture of these tribal communities. They are both revered in religion and respected for their prowess in war. Ever since the Stone Age, when elephants were represented by ancient petroglyphs and cave art, they have been depicted in various forms of art, including pictures, sculptures and even architecture.

Mahashweta Devi has shown that both Shiva and Kali have tribal origins as do Krishna and Ganesh. In the 8th century, the tribal forest goddess or harvest goddess was absorbed and adapted as Siva's wife. Ganesh owes its origins to a powerful tribe of elephant trainers whose incorporation into Hindu society was achieved through the deification of their elephant totem.

"How the Elephant Lost His Wings" is a story shared by tribal groups in Central India. It tells of a belief that in the beginning the first elephants had wings, but *"How the Elephant Lost His Wings"* is a story shared by tribal groups in Central India. It tells of a belief that in the beginning the first elephants had wings, but because they were disobedient and destructive, (after flying around they would rest on the roofs of tribal huts which collapsed under their great weight), their wings were removed by a local tribal god and were given instead to the peacock (who was quite plain at that time) to become its wonderful tail, and to the bare banana tree to become its majestic leaves. This story was of the genre of Rudyard Kipling's *"Just So Stories"* (apparently inspired by tribal folklore), and it was an original tale that might even capture the imagination of children in places as far away as Scotland. The tribes of central India usually like to tattoo various symbols related to their totem, god and goddess. It is a common believe among them that, these deities and ancestors protect them from different natural calamities, evil spirits, black magic, enemies, wild animals etc. For example, the Gonds female tattooed the symbol of five dots and a line (Gajkaran Deo, the elephant god) at the upper part of the foot, one dot on each toe and line from big toe to little toe and it is believed that these symbols on feet will enable them to bear weight. But generally the depiction of elephant in tattoo art symbolize a link to Nature.

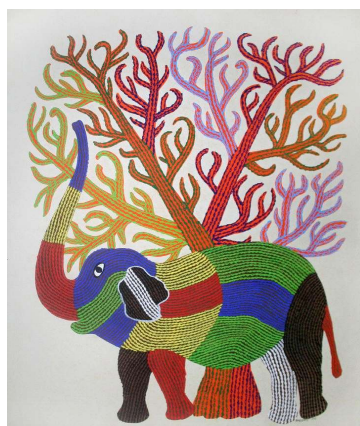


fig.1 .Depiction of elephant in Gond
Tribal Art

According to another Gondi folklore, the winged elephant (U data Hathi) was used by Gods and Goddesses in heaven, to transport them from place to place. One day, when the Lord was resting he told the elephant to take a break. The elephant decided to fly to the earth. Upon reaching the earth, he was delighted to find fields of sugarcane and banana trees. As soon as he started eating the

sugarcane the villagers came and tried to scare him off. But the elephant would not move. The villagers then called the Lord and asked him to intervene. The Lord was displeased with the Elephant and asked him never to go to earth again. A few days later, the Elephant went back to Earth to eat the sugarcane, he had loved the lush forests and the bananas. The villagers were upset, they asked the Lord to help. The Lord was furious and told the villagers to organize a feast and the Elephant was invited to join the revelry too. After enjoying a hearty meal and the Mahua wine the elephant fell asleep. Whilst he was asleep, the Lord cut off his wings. He gave one to the Banana tree and one to the Peacock. From that day the Peacock has a beautiful Plumage and the Banana tree has large leaves.



fig. 2 Depiction of Gondi folklore, the winged elephant (Udata Hathi) in Gond Art

The tribes of central India usually like to tattoo various symbols related to their totem, god and goddess. It is a common belief among them that, these deities and ancestors protect them from different natural calamities, evil spirits, black magic, enemies, wild animals etc. For example, the Gonds female tattoo the symbol of triangle at the sole of the right feet For magical purpose which earth and protect woman's foot from being bruised and cut when she walks about barefoot; Oval shape with a series of dots (Padam Sen Deo, the Foot God) at the Sole of the left foot for protection; Five dots and a line (Gajkaran Deo, the elephant god) at the upper part of the foot, one dot on each toe and line from big toe to little toe and it is believed that these symbols on feet will enable them to bear weight.

Besides this, Elephant appears as symbols of royal power and good fortune, prosperity and fertility, especially in paintings linked with marriage of tribal communities of central India. All these motifs along with various flowers, trees, birds and other objects of daily use have both direct and mythological meanings. Together they create a pictorial world of myth and ritual; desire and aspiration; of vibrating life forces; of aesthetic urges and creative potentiality of the community. Similarly Saoras wall paintings of tribal communities of Odisha are known as icons. These icons are drawn on the walls inside the house. These paintings consist of various sketches of human beings, elephants, gunmen, sun, moon, snakes, trees and various objects of nature. These paintings are of great religious significance representing a one-dimensional shrine dedicated to a particular deity in order to please it so that it may spare the members of the household from their invidious attention. The icons which were previously drawn for certain purposes are erased by smearing the walls with a solution mixed with red soil and a new icon is drawn to serve some other purpose.

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