

## **Gajalakshmi: The Evolution and Development**

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The word 'Gajalakshmi' is made up of two words gaja plus lakshmi. It is the name given to the sculpture in relief or to the motif of two water sprinkling elephants flanking a female either seated or standing on the blossomed lotus. The elephants are also standing on blossomed lotus on their hind legs.

The motif is very popular in India today and is worshipped as the goddess of wealth and abundance. Though everybody in this world needs wealth and prosperity and worships the gajalakshmi, the trader and merchant community is the one who worships the gajalakshmi fervently.

The earliest archaeological evidence of these motifs is of Bharhut and Sanchi stupa date back to 2<sup>nd</sup> BCE. Though most of the scholars trace the earliest motif in the Buddhist sculptures and Buddhist sites, they do not identify the motif as Mahamaya or the dream of Mahamaya or the birth of the Buddha. In fact had it not been seen on the earliest Buddhist sites, these motifs would never have been identified as anything related to Buddha and his birth.

It is to be understood that though Buddhism was lost from India from 12<sup>th</sup> CE, the popular Buddhist motifs remained, but the symbolism changed and new meanings were given to the same motifs. Something similar has happened to the motif of Gajalakshmi. The motif of Mahamaya in the course of time has become Gajalakshmi and has been adopted by everybody as the goddess of wealth.

This paper ventures into the possibility of a connection between Buddhist traders and merchants, trade routes and trading with Roman Empire to gain wealth and gold and the archaeological findings of gajalakshmi on the trade routes of Maharashtra. It also questions the placement of the gajalakshmi on the torana-s, later on the gateways or doorways of the temples, or even on the entrances of the forts or entrance gates of the cities.

The finding of the gajalakshmi relief sculptures on the trade routes from konkan to pathar of Maharashtra on the ghat belonging to the Satavahana period, definitely signifies much more than just the goddess of wealth worship.

This paper is an attempt to study the evolution of the gajalakshmi from the dream of Mahamaya as the birth of the Buddha to the development of gajalakshmi seen on the trade routes and now the worship of the gajalakshmi fervently by the trading community.

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