



DEPICTION OF ELEPHANTS IN INDIAN ART

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ABSTRACT

Art in India is a way of thinking and a way of expressing emotions, thoughts and beliefs. It is a great medium of spreading messages to the contemporary people as well as to the people of coming generations. In Indian art the motifs are chosen and used very wisely and it gives a deep meaning to the whole scene. Elephants are very popular motif in Indian art. This huge animal with its majestic trunk and tiny tail gives a vast sky to the imagination of the artist to fly and create many beautiful art piece. This depiction of elephant can be seen from the pre-historic period till date in various mediums like stone, mud, metal, conch, ivory, wood, jute, glass, plastic and what not? The present paper deals with such depictions of elephants from the remote past to modern times. The examples taken here show some unusual types of depiction that catches the eyes. Their religious and social values in India are also discussed.

Keywords: Elephant, Bhimbetka, Ashoka, Bharhut, Deogarh, Mamallapuram

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Introduction

In India, art has been accepted as a means of human compassion, personal or collective expression, as well as a means of giving expressions to social, religious, spiritual and artistic status and thinking. The aim of art in India is religious and spiritual along with the beautiful presentation of king's bravery, religious and social activities for the

betterment of his subject. This is the reason that we get examples of art in all forms and mediums like architecture, sculpture, paintings, and objects of day today life as weapons, implements, pots, cloths, ornaments, coins etc. made of stone, metal, mud or terracotta, wood, bamboo, colour and what not? The art of India is mostly religious in its thoughts and is never aimless. Each example of art represents

the deep thinking of not only the artist or artisan who had made it but also of the king or the person who desired to get it done, his spiritual or religious *gurus*, his advisors or ministers and his family too; because most of the times the artist or artisan was only a person who was giving shape to their desire and imagination with his expertise in that particular field. The examples of art can well be seen since the Prehistoric period. The rock shelters of Bhimbetka and Panchmarhi in Madhya Pradesh have beautiful paintings. These were discovered by V. S. Wakankar and are now listed in World Heritage Sites by UNESCO and are considered to be at least 10,000 years old (Mathpal, 1984:220).

Nature has been an important component in Indian art. A variety of forms of nature have always been used to sculpt human sentiments, faiths and beliefs. From nature itself, human beings have learnt to coordinate. He has accepted that human beings, who are most powerful, most clever and wise, and thus often considers themselves as Supreme, are just petty beings, exiguous and powerless before nature. By the disclosure of a variety of its diverse forms, it has always astonished and awestruck humans. Animals, birds, insects, trees and other vegetations along with human beings are all parts of nature. The man has made a very beautiful, accurate, well-thought and well-proportionate use of nature as a paradigm of art. He has chosen elephant as an art-pattern, which is very important and popular at the same time. Hinduism one of the oldest living religion of the world is deeply rooted in minds and souls of the people of India. But other religions like Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam Zoroastrianism, etc are also popular in this country and art associated with these religions are also found. Different people of different races, languages, religions and traditions practiced religion in their own ways and these often find expression in their art.

The importance of elephant in India is religiously and spiritually unprecedented. According to the cosmology of ancient India, the Earth is pinned over four elephants in four directions and the earthquakes occur because of their shaking. The importance of the elephant headed deity (*Hastimukha*) Ganesha is well known. The first deity to be worshipped

in Brahmanical rituals (*Prathama Pujya*) Ekdant Gajānan, with curved trunk (*Vakratunda*), the huge bodied (*Mahākāya*) Ganesha, is also very popular in the art. In Hindu mythology he provides good fortune and security. Lord Ganesha is the best example of harmony between nature and human kind. White coloured elephant, named Airavata is known as Indra's vehicle. It was found from the churning of ocean by the *Devas* and *Asuras* along with other jewels like poison, nectar, *soma*, *surā*, *Kaustubhamani*, *Dhanvantari*, the *Pārijāt* tree, the horse named as *Uchchaishravā* etc. The importance of elephant can be derived with the thought that he is considered as mount of Indra who is King of Devas. Thus it is also associated with royalty. According to the *Puranas* the sovereign kings possess seven jewels such as discus (*chakra*), chariot (*ratha*) jewels (*ratna*), queen (*Rāni*), treasure (*nidhi*), horse (*aśwa*), and elephant (*hasti*). The *Suddasana Sutta* of *Dīghnikāya* and the *Mandhātā Avadāna* of *Divyāvadāna* includes elephant with other jewels as ideal for a sovereign king. The strength and power of this animal has made it an important part of wars also; though it is not sure that it was used in wars in the Vedic period. The first example of its use in war is obtained from the war between Porus and Alexander in 326 BCE. A coin showing Porus riding a horse and Alexander riding an elephant is exhibited in the British Museum, London. Many scholars consider the elephant riding King as being Ambhi. The elephants were an important section of a King's army as *chaturanginisenā* (four fold army consisting of elephant corps, chariots, foot soldiers and cavalry). We find depiction of such kings with elephant in early Buddhist art especially on the early plaques of Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda (Gupta: 1983: 6). According to Gupta "One should not forget that here, the concept of the elephant as a jewel of *chakravartin* is not of an ordinary elephant but of a celestial one which brings luck and abundance to the king and his kingdom" (Gupta, 1983, 6). White elephant was the subject of great honour for kings of South Asian countries. The Siamese tradition believed it to bring happiness to the king and his kingdom. The kings of Siam and Cambodia, Pegu and Laos waged several wars for the possession of white elephants. Such elephants were given royal

treatment like food in gold or silver vessels and were covered with velvet cloth. Their illness was treated by royal physician and servants if suspected for their death were sentenced to death. The white elephant is considered to be a symbol of good fate in Thailand and Burma. Not only in Kerala province of India, but there is also a religious procession in Sri Lanka, in which the elephants march in religious processions. They are equally considered auspicious in all religions like Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain and are used in their processions.

Elephants are considered to be carriers of good destiny, intellect, progeny and security in India. Placing the statue of elephant with up-lifted trunk in the house is said to increase flow of positive energy

in the house and brings good luck. While the statue of the elephant with his trunk hanging down is said to increase positive energy and removes all obstacles; wisdom, power and progeny are achieved. The huge size of the elephants, its temperament, intelligence, sharp vision, strength, the trunk, the large ears, and the various gestures of this majestic animal have inspired artists from centuries. The paintings of elephants can be seen at prehistoric rock shelters of Bhimbetka, Pachmarhi, Lakhudiyar, etc. (Fig.8.1 A and B) in India and also in Africa.

The impressive size of the elephants, like a large canvas, provides a wide range to expand the artist's imagination. We have so many examples of decorated figures of this animal live or in artworks.



Figure 8.1A: Bhimbetka

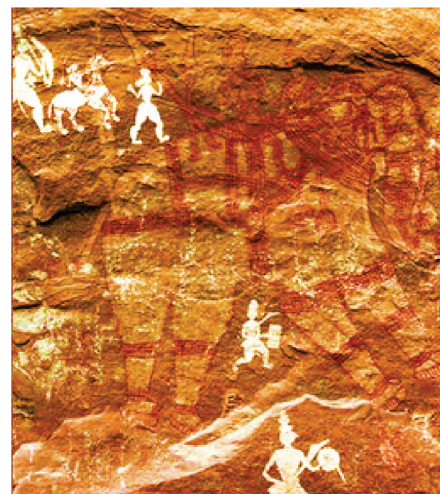


Figure 8.1B: Pachmarhi



Figure 8.2A: Pashupati Seal obtained from Mohenjodaro



Figure 8.2B: Seal obtained from Harappa

The initial depiction of elephants is found on the seals received from Harappan, Mohanjodaro and other Harappan sites; where he has been pictured with the Pashupati (nomenclature by John Marshall, 1931), tiger, deer and rhinoceros. Thus, the initial date of the depiction of elephants can be accepted approximately 2500 BCE. Similarly, there are independent representation of elephant too (Fig.8.2 A and B).

In the Mauryan period art received extensive patronage, especially under King Ashoka. The most exquisite examples of art were produced under the faith of Buddhism, a wide-spread religion of that time spreading all over Asia. Thousands of *stupas* were made to be erected by Ashoka; said to be 84,000 in numbers, though all are not found. He also inscribed edicts on stone pillars and rocks with the teachings of Lord Buddha. These stone columns were many times adorned with capitals also which were beautifully carved with different images. We see the depiction of elephant in different references in Maurya and Post Maurya periods. As Lord Buddha was not shown in person and different symbols were used to show his presence like his footprints, *stupa*, his begging bowl and also elephant. Elephant is usually related with his birth, because before his birth his mother Maya Devi has seen a white elephant entering her womb. On this, it was predicted that either

a great saint or a great sovereign king will take birth (Trainer, 2004: 24-5). Thus, the elephant represents Lord Buddha himself. The lion capital, built by Ashoka at Sarnath (located in Varanasi), the site of *Dharmachakra* enforcement (first preaching of laws) by Lord Buddha shows four lions sitting back-to-back and roaring pleasantly. They are sitting on a round abacus. This abacus is carved with four wheels of twenty-four spokes alternating with four animals representing the four events of Buddha's life. These are figures of elephant, horse, bull and a lion, which are related with his birth, renunciation, his zodiac sign and he is called a lion of Shakyan clan (*Shakyasingh*) himself (Fig.8.3). At the same time, these animals are also considered to be symbols of east, south, west and north directions respectively, thus saying that Buddha's teachings are (may) spreading in all directions. This lion capital is the national emblem of India. Another noteworthy elephant has been carved out by cutting rock at a place called Dhauli at Bhubaneswar in Orissa province in a manner as if the elephant is coming out of a stone cave. Only front part of this elephant is made and he is looking at the east direction. On the northern side of the rock, an inscription of emperor Ashoka of c.250 BCE (Fig.8.4) is inscribed. A very remarkable depiction of elephant can be seen on the coin of Demetrius I of Bactria (205-171 BCE), the founder



Figure 8.3: Lion Capital, Sarnath



Figure 8.4: Rock cut elephant, Dhauli

of Indo-Greek kingdom which shows him wearing an elephant's scalp as head-gear.

The beautifully adorned gates of Sanchi Stupa (second century BCE) are world famous due to their ornamentation. The eastern and northern gates of this stupa is carved with many aspects of Buddha's life. Here we can see an elegant image of elephant standing with the statue of *Shalbhanjika* while supporting the bracket at the same time. He is gazing at her with full awareness (Fig.8.5). Here, the ornamentation, the beauty and the grandeur of this animal can be seen in the six-tusked elephant (*Chhadanta*, as Buddha was known in one of his previous births and willingly gave his tusks to a cruel hunter) and in different processions, elephants giving respect to the Buddha etc. In these depictions their magnificent size and gesture, beauty and grandeur are noteworthy.

The depictions on the Bharhut *stupa* (Discovered by Alexander Cunningham in a ruined state) also provides many images of elephants, like the scene



Figure 8.5: Shalbhanjika with elephant, Sanchi

of the dream of mother Maya Devi, the elephant plucking leaves from a tree in joyful mood, elephant with a *yakshini* standing on him to pluck leaves from a tree, and the elephant is much amused by his stunning maiden rider lifting one of his legs upside. There are depictions resembling the *Gaj-Lakshmi* in which a goddess, standing on a lotus, has a lotus flower in her hands, and two elephants are pouring water on her. Perhaps this depiction became very popular and has developed as Gaj-Lakshmi in Gupta period. Amaravati (c. 3rd century BCE-2nd Century CE) has also exhibited the scene of the mother's dream. The scene of the suppression of *Nalāgiri Hasti* (elephant named *Nalāgiri*) is wonderfully carved here. This episode has been recorded in full detail so that it is not at all difficult to understand the incident described there. The raging elephant, sent by Lord Buddha's cousin Devadutta to kill the Buddha, is very frantic in the first scene where the drunk elephant is throwing people who come in his path by picking them up with his long trunk, while in the second scene he is kneeling at the Buddha's feet. The frantic elephant of the previous scene is very calm in the company of Lord Buddha.

The Gupta period (c. fourth-fifth century CE) witnessed a flourishing state in terms of art and architecture, dance and drama, literature etc. The artists of this period used stone, clay, wood, metal and other mediums in various ways. Elephant was a popular motif at that time too. The Dasavatara temple at Deogarh shows an elegant and beautiful depiction of Vishnu sitting on the coil of Sheshnag, Kartikeya on the peacock, as well as Indra sitting on his mount Airavat and the liberation of Gajendra by Vishnu (Fig. 8.6). In the paintings of Ajanta and Ellora caves elephants are painted in different ways (c. fifth century CE). These include the liveliness of the elephant's eye as it walks through the lotus flowers. It also shows expertise and control of the artist's hands on his brush (Fig. 8.7).

In the seventh century CE., the scenes of Gangāvtaran (descent of Ganga from heaven), Arjun's *Tapascharyā* (meditation) etc. on the rocks at Mamallapuram in Chegalpattu district of Tamil Nadu, is very natural and conscious depictions of elephants (Harle, 1994: 278-83). It has been placed in the list of world heritage monuments by the



Figure 8.6: Gajendramoksh, Deogarh



Figure 8.7: Elephant between Lotus Flowers, Ajanta

UNESCO. Here, the depiction of elephants and a calf, safely walking in between the feet of Gajraj, is very enthralling, and is a reflection of artist's vision and his loving thoughts (Fig. 8.8).

The elephants' images on the walls of the famous temples of Khajuraho, built between c. 900-1150 CE. are marvellously carved. The disciplined



Figure 8.8: Depiction of Elephants, Mamallapuram

elephants walking one after the other in a row (Fig.8.9 A), playing by holding each other's trunks, elephants taking part in war and in a state procession, supporting the walls in sitting or standing positions (Fig.8.9 B) etc. are few to mention among many more. It can be clearly said that the craftsmen who have carved them were very visionary, imaginative, and were proficient in their work. It is confirmed with the view of images of elephants that are looking at their side or back by turning their necks or of only front part of this massive animal (Fig. 8.9C). An eight-handed image of Ganesha of Khajuraho is world famous (Pl. 8.9D). It shows very efficiently carved body of the God with beautiful depiction of his jewellery along with his worshippers.

Starting from the paintbrush of prehistoric man, the art of sketching and painting in the medieval period is found in the form of miniature paintings passing through various span of times. The elephants of white and black or grey colour have been painted very expertly. While Indra's elephant, Airavat, is white in colour, many of the elephants of the kings are shown in black or grey colour. The Victoria and Albert Museum, London has a miniature painting of Kangra style, which shows beautifully painted scenes of *Akbarnama* in which Akbar, mounted upon an elephant is chasing another elephant on the bridge over the river Yamuna.

Depiction of elephants in art can be seen in various countries like Ankor Vat temple of Cambodia, in Bali, Sri Lanka, Rome, Africa, Japan, etc. The elephants are considered as wise chiefs in African legends who impartially settle disputes among the forest creatures. In Japan elephant-

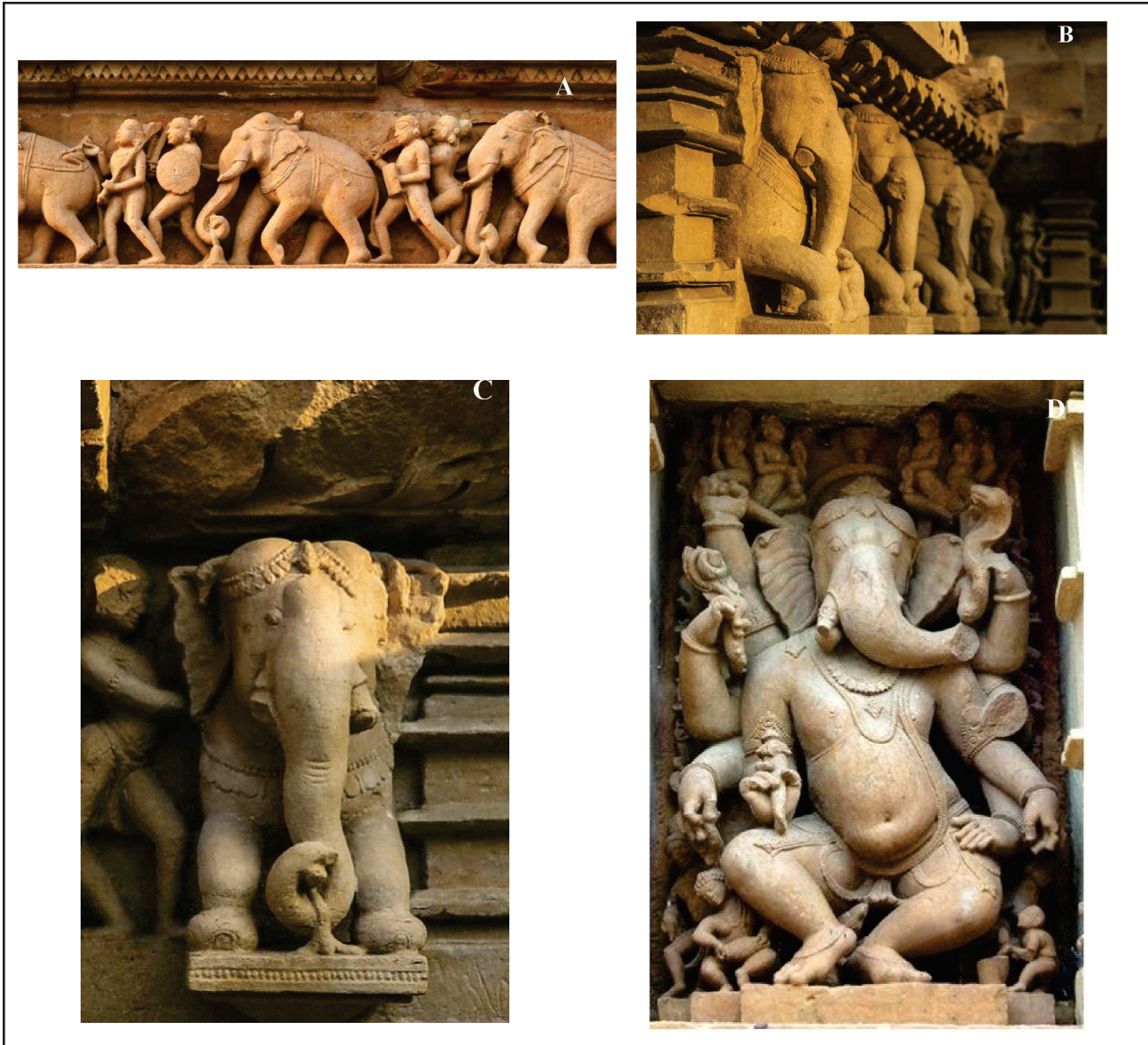


Figure 8.9A: Row of Elephants, Khajuraho
 Figure 8.9B: Elephant supporting brackets, Khajuraho
 Figure 8.9C: Front part of Elephant, Khajuraho
 Figure 8.9D: Ganesha, Khajuraho

headed God named as Kanqiten (Deva of Bliss) and is compared with Hindu God Ganesha and is shown with his female counterpart (Sanford, James H., 1991, Literary Aspect of Japan's Dual- Ganesha Cult, in Brown, Robert L. (ed) Ganesha: Studies of An Asian God, Albany, State University of New York Press, p. 289).

The depiction of elephants is done today in every form and in every medium. The tea kettle made of ceramic, the elephant made of coconut jute (local art of Odisha), brass, wood, bamboo, silver

and gold jewellery and show-pieces, toys, combs and applique work on cloth (in Jaipur, Rajasthan) etc., show the affectionate and curious outlook of the artists and artisans. There is a wonderful example of the control on the hand of a reticulated elephant artist made of the mono stone at Rajghat, Varanasi. He carves one elephant inside the other one and the third elephant inside the second one, etc.(Fig.8.10) and stone remains one. He uses an electric drill nowadays but earlier all the work was done by hands only.



Figure 8.10: Elephants in different mediums, modern times

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