

## Elephants: All Immanent in Indian Temple Art

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### ABSTRACT

Nature provides feelings to human mind. Art is the reflection of feelings which germinates in the embryo of nature. Indian civilization has its own way of artistic expression which can be seen in Indian temples; both in execution of temple architecture and sculpture of India where nature has played a crucial role. It may be noticed that symbolically and naturally, flora and fauna present themselves in Indian Temple Art. For their majestic power, human friendly nature and being the symbol of divinity and prosperity, elephants were highly venerated in Indian art and religion.

Elephants are subjects of sculptural art embellished in Indian temples. They are presented in a naturalistic way in basal mouldings of temples, in architraves or the capitals of the pillars as caryatids and the role played by them as beasts of burden for the benefit of humans, inspired artisans to place the animal in such a position. Even its contribution well-equipped by mythical stories narrated in *Purāṇas* like the weight of the world rested on divine elephant, oriented the concepts of Indian artisans. These presentations are of various kinds placing the figure in profile or in oblique or turned aside in different postures. Among plenty of examples temples of Kashmir as well as temples of Chattisgarh, Orissa and Deccan present this feature where *gajathara* is very prominent in basal mouldings.

Representation of elephants can be noticed in the doorways, in the parapets of staircases of temples. According to *Śilpasāstras* and *Vāstusāstras* the deities should be treated as a king hailed with royal paraphernalia, so attendant elephants were executed in temples in honour of Gods. Elaborate examples can be seen, especially, in temples in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Hoyasāla Karnataka.

Naturalistic presentation of fighting elephants, either in battlefield or in forest in their own domain, elephants in a procession etc. are common subjects in panel sculptures of temples all over India.

A motif styled as *gaja-simha* or *gaja-vyāla* was a general feature of temple sculptures, especially, in medieval temples of eastern India. Generally, it is a combination of rampant lion and elephant in a mood of fighting.

Fantastic creations of human imagination presents fancy animals like *Ihāmṛṛga*; *i.e. gajavaktrajhasha* where the animal has the face and trunk of an elephant, and the hind quarter of fish united in a single creature. These can be seen in abundant in South Indian temples till the medieval period. These were mentioned in canonical texts as well as in *Rāmāyana* regarding the description of *Puspaka ratha* of demon king Rāvana.

In *Vāstusāstras* enumeration of different kinds of temple architecture including plan and elevation is noted down, and has a category termed as *hastipṛstha* or elephant back, where apsidal plan of the temple resemble the rear portion of the elephant. This way of apsidal building can be seen in Kapoteśvara Temple at Chezarla and Durgā Temple at Aihole in South India. This is an example how people formed their concepts regarding shapes of temples taking support of the instances from nature. This support system in between nature and human civilization thus created the platform of Indian temple architecture and sculpture.

**Keywords:** *caryatids, gaja-simha, gajathara, Ihāmṛṛga, gajavaktrajhasha, hastipṛstha*

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