

## Elephant as a Fertility Symbol

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### ABSTRACT

Elephant is a sacred animal in Indian mythological and theological literature. It is called *Gaja* in Sanskrit. Etymologically, *gaja* means animal born in the space. Here, 'ga' is denotative to *gajana* i.e., space and 'ja' signifies *janma* meaning birth. In fact, *Gaja* in its physical form symbolizes movement of the cloud, basically the vehicle of the rain God *Indra*. The vehicle of *Indra* has been called *Airavata*, the son of *Ira*. *Ira* is female aspect of fertility. Therefore, her son, is known as *Airavata*. *Ira* means white fluid that contains power of procreation. In this respect *Airavata* is also associated with power of fertility.

In Buddhist mythology itself the dream of Maya, the mother of Buddha reflects similar viewpoint. An artistic testimony of this idea is available at Dhauli hillock in Odisha where a monolithic elephant has been depicted as a space animal emerging from cloud. An inscription found there depicts 'gajatama', the most revered elephant who reminds us of the *Airavata*. In the Buddhist art of Mathura, Sanchi, Bharhuta, Nagarjunikonda, Amravati and many other places of India the dream of Maya is a popular scene. The entry of the white elephant in womb of Maya is adequately associated with the birth of an 'enlightened being'. The figure of 'jalabhisheka Lakshmi' found from Bharuta stupa to the Kailash temple of Ellora with two elephants pouring sacred water on goddess of wealth is a vibrant expression of the water cosmology and fertility cult. The sole of many Indian temples has multiple figures of elephants. This type of sculptural schemata is called *gajathara* or *gajasamghata*. Here, elephants are shown as figures that are carrying the *vimana* of the presiding deity of the temple. Composite figures of elephants are equally common in temple art. The composite figure of elephant is often called *gajavyata*. Generally, the trunk of this composite figure is reminiscent to a crocodile, specifically a sea monster. Again it shows the association of elephant with the aquatic world.

This paper envisages the significance of elephant as a motif of sacredness and a figure of great sanctity in Indian art and literature.

**Keywords:** *gaja- space born, Ira – white fluid of fertility, Airavata- vehicle of God Indra, Jalabhisheka Lakshmi- Goddess of wealth being offered sacred water by young celestial elephants.*