

GAJA as Depicted in Indian Arts and Crafts

Sanghamitra Rai Verma

ABSTRACT

Gaja or elephant has been an integral part of Indian Arts, crafts, culture and heritage since time immemorial. Elephants have been presented repeatedly in Indian Art and sculpture. Sculptures in India are lavishly ornamented. The richness and exuberance of temple sculptures are largely due to depiction of animate and inanimate world. Animal carvings especially elephants and their various combinations are largely depicted on the walls of caves and temples. The preponderance of elephant motifs on the railings of caves and temples shows cultural association of people with elephants and their availability in plenty both in the wild and in captivity.

This particular paper on the basis of literary accounts, sculptural evidences and paintings would focus on the myriad aspects of Indian arts and crafts pertaining to the use of *Gaja* or elephant as a symbol and motif.

The paper will start its survey from the remains from one of the earliest civilizations of mankind, the Indus Valley Civilization which provides the earliest and careful representation of elephant on seals and amulets. If we look into the lexicons, the hymns of the *Rgveda* mentions that a white elephant as the carrier or *vahana* of lord Indra, the warrior God of the heaven. The *Jatakas* refers to the stories of lord Buddha descended on the Earth in the form of an elephant and so on.

Elephants have also been repeatedly depicted as symbols and motifs. Initially Lord Buddha was symbolised in various forms including the symbol of elephant. There are several myths related to the elephants in Indian culture and society. The most popular belief indicating the sign of conception in womanhood is with the visit of an elephant in her dreams.

Religio-mythical tales of India associate mother goddess with an elephant, not primarily as her *Vahana*, but as the symbolic source of fecundation by representing two or more elephants flanked on either side of the mother- goddess and bathing her with the waters of life. This is exemplified in the *Gajalakshmi* motif seen in different temples of India.

Elephant motifs have also been vastly used in various Indian crafts especially textiles, both traditional and tribal. Textiles are associated with social and ritualistic traditions of the people. Colours, patterns, designs, symbols and motifs signify artistic pursuits and thus

bear social significance. Designs on textiles reveal a deep symbolic nature that encompasses culture of the people. Thus motifs and designs are inspired by their nature, beliefs, folklore, flora and fauna. Elephant motif has been abundantly represented in Indian textiles since the very beginning probably because of the fact that it is considered as a symbol of fertility and prosperity. Finally the paper will try to locate various socio-cultural implications of the use of elephant motif in Indian arts and crafts.

Keywords: *Elephant, Arts, Crafts, Sculptures, Textiles*

Assistant Professor in History, Hindu College, University of Delhi, Delhi, INDIA

Email: sanghamitrarv@gmail.com