

Depiction of Elephants in Temples in Vidarbha Region

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ABSTRACT

Vidarbha is one of the oldest parts of India. There are many references about this region in literatures like Veda, Upanishad, Purana's etc. In ancient period this region was famous as "Dandakaranya". It has a dense forest and large rivers like Vainganga, Pranhita and Godavari. This natural condition was very favorable for living elephants. Archaeological evidence also confirms the existence of elephants. Human beings have coexisted with this giant animal for years together, even 200 years ago. This coexistence is reflected in local culture literatures, Paintings, Religions, Folk art, Games etc. The depiction of elephants goes back to the earlier centuries.

Elephants symbolize noble things such as wisdom, courage, stature and strength. Elephants are also symbolic of longevity, because of their long lifespan. Elephants have been the subject of various cultural depictions in popular culture, mythology and symbolism. The origin of the elephant as a symbol of good luck and wisdom comes from Hinduism, where it is represented by the popular elephant-headed God Ganesh. The elephant as a *vāhana* (*vehicle*) represents prosperity, wisdom and royal power, as it is associated with Lakshmi and Indra. Indra's vahana is a flying white elephant named Airavata. Some temples depict that the elephants balance the temple on their back, which reflects their mighty strength. Elephants also have negative connotations, for instance Gajavidala, which is a motif in the architecture of India that depicts a lion i.e. Dharma overpowering an elephant, the latter symbolizing Ego.

Gaja-Vyalas are seen on the temples wall. It is an imaginative combination of lion and the elephant; the body, tail and paws are those of the lion but the face is that of the elephant. The details of various depictions of elephant will be discussed in the paper.

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