

## **Elephants and Gods: A Sacred Alliance**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Stories of elephant in life and legends have captured the imagination for the countless generations of Indian subcontinent.

The very form of the elephant triggers awe, delight and extraordinary grandeur, in one's mind. Thus, it is no wonder that it has been assimilated and internalised in legends and stories of Indian subcontinent.

Throughout the history, canons of all the three main religious traditions of India are filled with mythological stories where elephants are part of central story, in association with Gods and Goddesses. Both malevolent and benevolent aspects of elephants are superbly utilised in the description of deity and/or mythological narratives. Various *shilpa* texts further stress and elaborate on the iconographic elephant association, brought out by these sacred texts. These iconological associations take its form in the sculptural compositions found in religious complexes across Indian subcontinent. So much so, that the very deity can be identified with the specific elephant aspect. The common examples are easily observed in the story of Ganeśa or in the form of Gaja-Lakṣmī.

The paper, thus, aims at tracing this sacred alliance between elephants and religious pantheons in Brahmanical, Jaina and Buddhist traditions of India through prominent examples. It attempts to comparatively evaluate the textual narratives and sculptural art.

**Keywords:** Hindu, Jaina, Buddhist, Religion, Elephant, Religious text, Iconography, India