

Elephants in Art, Architecture and History of Kalinga

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ABSTRACT

Kalinga is also named as Orissa and is a place where art and architecture had reached the epitome of its glory. The minute observations of and love for nature are the essential qualities of an artist which guide his creative faculties. The great sculptors of Kalinga, the then South Kosal, had observed elephants in nature and applied their technical knowledge achieved through the centuries to the animal motives depicted on the walls of the various temples of Kalinga. The preponderance of elephant motifs on the railings of temples shows a cultural association of people with the animal and their availability in plenty in the wild and in captivity.

There are several myths related to elephants in Indian literature. The most popular belief indicating the sign of conception in womanhood by the visit of a snake in her dream (traceable not only in India but also in different parts of the world with slight variations) was directly transferred to the elephant (Zimmer, 1962). Thus, in the Buddhist legend the future Buddha is said to have left Tusita heaven and was conceived by his mother Maya or Mahamaya in a dream who saw him descending from the heaven in the form of a white elephant. Sen (1972) observes that a similar type of legend is also connected with the birth of Mahavira whose mother, Trisala, is reported to have had a dream of a four-tusked elephant when she conceived the said saviour. But, as the elephant ultimately became the symbol of the Buddha who is said to have descended to the earth in the form of an “elephanta” “saddanta” according to tradition, it ceased to be a sign of conception for the common woman although it still remained the symbol of fecundation for the divine female. The elephant figures at Dhauli and Ashokajhara were intended to remind the people of the birth story of Gautama Buddha. In fact, the great stupa built at Dhauli by Buddhist monks from Japan in the early nineteen seventies depicts on its wall the dream of Mayadevi and the birth of Gautama Buddha. Thus, the elephant has been represented as raining clouds, the *Vahana* of Indra, fertility of crops, the conception of womanhood, the sign of fecundation of mother goddess and her *Vahana*, the guardian of quarters, the symbol of the sun and also of the Buddha and Mahavira.

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