

Representation of Elephant in Hoysala Temples

With reference to Hoysaleshwara Temple of Halebidu

Soumya Manjunath Chavan¹

Introduction

Elephants are subject of many Indian mythologies, various forms of art like paintings, sculptures and architecture. The elephant is represented on the Harappan seals; the *Hastyaayur-veda*, “The Sacred Wisdom of the longevity of elephants is given in a compendium of over 7600 verse-couplets of the Vedas. A brief treatise called ‘*matangalila*’ meaning “The Playful Treatise on Elephants” contains a number of mythical details of elephants. The Airavata was the first divine elephant to proceed from the eggshell in the right hand of Brahma; followed by more elephants to form eight pairs of elephants which became the ancestors of all elephants, both in heaven and on earth. They are called the Dig-Gajas or “elephants of the directions of space”, supporting the universe at the four quarters and four points between. The myth of the ‘Airavata’ the white elephant, arising from the churning of the Milky Ocean is considered as symbolic of prosperity. Elephants are treated sacred and symbolic of strength and wisdom. Wisdom is represented by Ganesha the deity with an elephant’s head, of the Hindu pantheon. Elephants are represented in all its majesty in the sculptures of temples like, the Rock cut temple in Dhauri, Orissa; painting of Gaja Jataka in cave No. 17, Ajanta; Elephant and the lotus creeper in the Stupa of Sanchi; the elephant represented in the temple of Kailasanatha at Ellora of the 8th century AD contributed by the Rashtrakuta dynasty exhibits grandeur along with the welcoming panel in the entrance of Gajalakshmi who is flanked by two well defined elephants.

The temples built between 11th and 14th centuries by the Hoysala rulers exhibit intricate sculptures and freezes in stone as a part of its architecture. Extremely stylistic, they belong to Karnataka, a state in the southern part of India. Some of the sites of this period include temples at Belavadi, Amruthapura, Hosaholalu, Mosale, Arasikere etc. Some of the popular temples are marked as Chennakesava Temple at Belur, the Hoysaleswara Temple at Halebidu and the Keshava Temple at Somanathpura. The temples dedicated to Shiva or Vishnu, the two main deities of the Hindu pantheon, placed in the sanctum sanctorum with a circumambulatory passage, the outer portion unfold on a unique plan with projections and recesses in the external walls. The temple walls are richly covered with intricately carved sculptures with themes of different forms of the Hindu gods and goddesses, along with stylised animal figures and exquisitely decorative patterns of flora and fauna.

The Hoysaleshwara temple at Halebidu is well known for its sculptures that run all along the outer wall, starting with a dancing image of the elephant god Ganesha on the left side of the south

¹ Department of Performing and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Jain University, Bangalore, India.

entrance and ending with another image of Ganesha on the right hand side of the north entrance. There are also good examples of the elephants sculpted on the walls, represented as the vehicle of Indra and as the demon Gajasura who is slayed by Shiva. According to Settar, there are not less than 1248 elephants carved using about 950 ft. of space in the Hoysaleswara temple, which are either marching to a battlefield, or in the midst of it, or on their triumphant return march. The paper well supported by the photographs of the sculptures with a brief analysis of the uniqueness of representing elephant in various forms like the Ganesha – The elephant headed God, Gajasamharamurti - Shiva slaying the elephant demon, Airavata – The flying elephant vehicle of Indra, Bhima fighting elephants, elephants trying to kill Prahallada, Elephants sculpted on the lower tier of the temple and the composite animal Makara used for decoration of the entrance gates.

Hoysaleswara temple at Halebidu temple

Halebidu, situated 210 kilometers to the west of Bangalore in Karnataka, houses the temple of Hoysaleswara with two vimana or towers known as Dvikuta dedicated to Lord Shiva in the form of Hoysaleswara and Shantaleswara. The temple is facing east and has four entrances; two to the East with a sculpture of Nandi facing each of the entrances and one on the South and the other on the North; all the doorways have intricately carved door keepers. The ground plan of the temple belonging to the 11th century is in a typical Hoysala style of star shape, with Shiva Linga installed in the sanctum and the temple stands on a three feet high platform. Hoysaleswara temple is known for the sculptures that run all along the outer wall, starting with a dancing image of the god Ganesha on the left side of the south entrance and ending with another image of Ganesha on the right hand side of the north entrance. According to Gerard Foekema, perhaps no other Hoysala temple is as articulate in sculpture as this is and these sculptures are “second to none in the whole of India”. The stone used here is soap stone which is soft while sculpting but gets hard and dark when exposed to Sun and moisture. The outer wall has ten to eleven rows of sculpture panels and freezes which run on particular themes. The lower row dedicated to elephants, followed by rows of lions, foliage patterns, horses, a series of narrative panels, makara or crocodile designs, swans, a bigger row of depicting narrative panels of Hindu Gods and Goddess and finally the towers.

Ganesha – The elephant headed God

The Ganapati Upanishad seeks to propound Ganesa-vidya, explaining the principle of Ganapati in terms of the Vedantic instruction. He manifests in the beginning of creation and transcends both prakriti and purusha, this god is the cause of the world and is compassionate towards his devotee. He is to be adored as four armed, carrying the gestures of protection and boon-bestowal in his normal hands, and noose and goad in the upper hands. He is red in colour, and has a large belly. He is presumably elephant – headed, with ears like winnow-baskets and a single tusk. His body is smeared with red unguent and he is to be worshipped with red flowers. He is here spoken of as Siva’s son and the deity that bestows boons, (Varada – murti). He is invoked for elimination of obstacles (Vignana-sha), for getting rid of sins, obtainment of all learning, intelligence and eloquence.¹

The classical eighteen puranas which have narrations of Ganesha are Brahma-Vaivarta-purana (Ganapathi-khanda), Siva-purana (Rudrasamhita, Kumara-khanda), Padma-purana (srishti-khanda, chapters 61-63), Bhavishya-purana (chaturtha-uttaraparva, chapters 31-33), Skanda-purana (Kashi-khanda), Vishnudharmottara-purana, Varahapurana (Vinayakotpatti), Linga-purana, Agni-purana, Brhmanda-purana, Narada-purana, Garuda-purana, Brhma-purana and Saura-purana. These puranas helped crystallize Ganesha form and prescribe rituals. However, not all the accounts found in the puranas agree with each other; there are different versions of the same episodes. One example of the origin of Ganesha finds description here.

There are three versions of Ganesha found in Skanda-purana – On one occasion, the human beings performed penances for reaching the heavenly realms. As they entered into the august region in great multitudes and threatened to make their presence felt, Indra, the lord of realms, rushed to Shiva for solution. Siva looked at Parvati rubbed her body, took out a little amount of dirt and made an image (elephant – headed, four-armed and big bellied) out of it. When it acquired life, Parvati commanded this monstrous image to create obstacles for the austerities of human beings who desired to go to heaven. This was Vighna or Vignesvara. When he set out on his job, Shiva presented him with an axe and Parvati with a bowl of sweet cakes; Karttikeya gave him a rat for his vehicle, Brahma omniscience, Kubera wealth, Surya valor and Chandra luster.

In another context in the same section, we read that Parvati, to divert from boredom, fashioned a doll out of her bodily dirt. It was dwarfish in stature and had a face like that of an elephant. Parvati showed it to Shiva and requested to infuse life into it. Siva did as she desired and as it was the fourth day of the lunar month, (chaturthi), he bestowed this boon: child, you will be the commander of all my troops. Those who worship you on the fourth day of the lunar month will be free from all misfortune and grief.² Many myths and legends are associated with the Ganapati and can be found in above mentioned puranas.

Depiction of Ganesha in stone is found from fourth century are many and in various postures like sitting, standing, dancing, with and without attendants. Dancing Ganesha known as ‘Nriyaganapati’ found in the Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in the tenth century but a richly jeweled body and head with a swing in the posture is found in the temples of the Hoysala period, like Chennakeshava temple at Belur. Ganesha dancing on the rat is found in West Bengal in eleventh century and good example is found in Hoysaleshwara temple at Halebidu.³ The Hoysaleshwara temple welcomes with a beautiful sculpture of a sitting Ganesha placed on the left side on an independent platform.(Fig1). The South and the Northern entrances both host a dancing Ganesha with detailed carvings and well defined jewels. (figs 2a&b)

¹. Rao, S K Ramachandra, *The compendium of Ganesha*, New Delhi, India Sri Satguru Publications 1992, p 11-15

². Rao, S K Ramachandra, *The compendium of Ganesha*, New Delhi, India Sri Satguru Publications 1992, p 131-134

³. Geer, Alexandra van der, *Animals in stone: Indian Mammals Sculptured Through Time*, Brill, LEIDEN • BOSTON 2008, p 76-77

Gajasurasamharamurti

He is described as Shiva who has kept his raised leg on the head of an Elephant demon; in his raised hands, a Spear, and a Sword (a Horn) are shining; in other hands he has a Chisel and a Deer; His face looks fierce; on his His left stands goddess *Gauri* whose face shows fear and accompanied by the son, His hand carries a sharp weapon. A demon assumed the form of an elephant and attacked devotees engaged in the worship of Shiva. Shiva manifested himself from a linga and attacked the demon with his trident. Eventually he destroyed the demon, tore off his skin, and wore it as his garment.⁴

The demon in the form of elephant known as Gajasura, beleaguered gods and sages, and tried to conquer Kashi. The constant battles between the demon and weakened Shiva ganas, forcing Shiva's intervention. Gajasura regarded his death as deliverance and asked that his skin should be stripped to shade Shiva's head, while elephant head should be string on Shiva's garland of skulls. Thus Shiva as destroyer of Gaja and murti portrayed dancing with elephant skin held over his head and head either between his feet. When Gajasura the lord of the Danavas, and the son of Mahisha was killed, the gods regained their original positions.

Another version of the episode of the elephant-demon is found in the Varahapurana, which relates how the demon Andhaka assumed the form of an elephant and attempted to carry Uma away. Shiva attacked the demon, tore off his skin, and wore it as his garment.⁵ The story of destruction of an elephant-asura by Shiva and his wearing the skin of the elephant as his garment is found in the Suprabhedagama. Amsumadbhedagama, Shilparatna and also in Saivagamas.

Gajasamharamurti depicted (fig 3) on the Southern wall of the Hoysaleshwara temple of Halebidu one of the unique representations in all its detail of nails, ornaments, jewels, dancing posture of the fierce form of Shiva holds the elephant torn and stretched to the four corners and dances on its head. It is a well composed dancing image of Shiva on the elephant's head with its feet seen in four corners and its torn skin borders the image within which is aesthetically portrayed the Nandi, Shiva's vehicle, and the drummers who are rendering the music for the fierce dance.

Airavata – the Elephant vehicle of Indra

The Mahabharatha mentions the *ratnas* or jewels that emerged out of the *Samudramanthana* – the churning of the ocean; one of the many things is the elephant with wings Airavata.⁶ The cosmic egg from which the creation of the Sun took place, the Unborn took solemnly in his hands the two halves of the shining shells and inspires the sages to chant the seven *samans* at once. From the shell he held in the right hand, eight elephants were born representing the quarters or regions and one of them was Airavata, who became the vehicle of Indra. Airavata was struck by a curse to be born on earth by sage Durvasa for destroying a garland he had offered to Indra. Airavata

⁴ J.L. Shastri and G.P. Bhatt (eds); Translated By G.V. Tagare, *Kurma Purana* (Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology: Vol. 21) , Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, India, p 15-25

⁵ Shastri, J L, Bhatt, G P. Venkatasubramani Aiyar, S. *Varaha Purana*, Vol 31-32. Motilal Banarasidas, New Delhi, 2003

⁶ Gupta. S. K, *Elephant in Indian Art and Mythology*, Abhinav Publications 1985, p 4

was won over by Indra when it arose from the churning of the ocean.⁷ The sculpture panels at Halebidu depict the narratives of these episodes in a very dramatic manner. There are many freezes dedicated to the battle depicting Indra mounted on Airavata for recovering his wife Shachi's *parijata* tree (a medicinal plant) stolen by Krishna.⁸ The panel as in (fig 4) depicts the battle between Vishnu mounted on the Garuda-the eagle with his consort, and Indra with his wife on his lap and thunderbolt in his hand rides on the elephant vehicle Airavata. The Airavata also attained a semi-divine status and was also worshipped and was also considered as symbol of auspiciousness, *mangalika*.⁹ The representation of the Airavata can be seen in the Bhoganandishwara temple at Nandi in Karnataka belonging to the 9th century; Indra is seen on Airavata in the Jain caves at Ellora belonging to the 10th century; Indra relief decorates the western hall of the Lakshminarasimha temple at Nuggihalli, Karnataka belonging to the 13th century where Indra and Sachi on their elephant are fighting for Parijata.¹⁰

A beautifully composed panel depicts Airavata, the elephant as the vehicle of lord Indra gets a significant representation with a good size of the panel, prominently placed on the western side which looks illuminated in the evening light. Airavata looks magnificent mounted by Indra and his wife, holds in his trunk a tree and looks like he is walking hurriedly. Highly bejeweled, he looks robust and energetic exhibiting the strength to carry on his back the weight of the king of gods Indra and his wife with ease. Indra holds his thunderbolt and is seen hurling it against Vishnu who is seen in with his consort flying on his vehicle Garuda. In this war scene between Vishnu and Indra, the Airavata gets a significant central placement and hold the composition in dominance of its majestic form and thrusting movement.

Conclusion

The representation of elephant in Hoysaleswara temple at Halebidu in the form of Ganesha, Airavata, Bhima killing a herd of elephants, Prahallada being crushed between elephants and the row of elephants that lace the temple at the lowest of the freezes are unique in their form and detailing. Ganesha being the god of wisdom is also known to be a remover of obstacles and has the head of an elephant has in the Indian rituals worshipped as Mahaganapati in the beginning and end with offerings to him in the form of Uchishta Ganapati, perhaps it is this concept that could have been significant in the sculpting a Ganesha in the entrance and one at the exit. The Gajasamharamurti stands dancing on the elephant head and bordered by its torn body, with a momentum that enlivens the sculpture though in a frozen moment. Elephant as the vehicle of the Indra, the Airavata is depicted in all its grandeur in the Hoysaleswara temple, just next this panel is Gajendra Moksha depicting Vishnu liberating Gajendra, a cursed king who is attacked by a crocodile. This panel however, treats the elephant very insignificantly and is pushed to the edge of the wall, thus goes unnoticed unless specifically read for. The smaller

⁷ Gupta. S. K, *Elephant in Indian Art and Mythology*, Abhinav Publications 1985, p 48

⁸ <http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/parijata.pdf> p 20

⁹ Gupta. S. K, *Elephant in Indian Art and Mythology*, Abhinav Publications 1985, p 12

¹⁰ Geer, Alexandra van der, *Animals in stone: Indian Mammals Sculptured Through Time*, Brill, LEIDEN BOSTON 2008, p 217

freezes depict stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata which have interesting depictions of elephants. The narration of Bheema killing a heap of elephants looks very powerful though small in size the suffering of the rounded elephants is exhibited effectively (fig 8). The image of Prahallada (fig 9) the prince whose unmatched devotion to Vishnu, enrages his father who attempts to kill him by giving him poison and crushing him by elephants. This panel though small in size depicts the prince in his undisturbed tranquil amidst two tyrant elephants. The temple takes one around in many rows and the most noticeable of them is that of the elephants (fig 7) in the lowest strip of the temple. The line of elephants in different stance, and perhaps no two elephants are similar in as many numbers not less than 1248 signifying strength, power and courage. The Makaras (fig 10) are many and run around the temple in one of the rows, this composite animal has the trunk of an elephant signifying the strength. Thus, the Hoysaleshwara temple represents many elephants in its multifaceted and vivid manner leaving scope for multilayered understanding and interpretations.



fig.1 Ganesha, Southern entrance



fig. 2a Ganesha on the Northern entrance



fig. 2b Ganesha on the Southern entrance



fig 3 Gajasurasamharamurti



fig. 4 Indra mounted on Airavatha



fig. 5 Elephants in war scenes



fig.7 Depiction of elephants in a row



fig.8 Freeze exhibiting Bheema slaying elephants



Fig 9. Prahallada being crushed between elephants



fig 10 Makaras seen on the door jamb and freeze

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