

## Elephants in the Mauryan Age: Significance and Symbolism

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Deification and domestication of animals began with the evolution of human culture. Humans imposed a range of impacts on animals that can be grouped conveniently into domain of domestication, dispersal, and extinction. Domestication is one of the most congenial ways in which humans have affected animals and its consequences are profound. They always considered themselves as a superior species but realized that accompaniment of certain categories of animals is pertinent for their survival and progress. Elephants belong to one of the earliest animal groups that was domesticated as well as worshipped, especially in the Indian subcontinent. In the Indus Valley Civilization elephants were domesticated, hunted for ivory and worshipped too. Ivory articles, seals depicting elephants, and terracotta figurines of elephants have been discovered from numerous sites of the Indus Valley Civilization.

A seals depicting proto- Śiva from Mohenjodaro is surrounded by a rhinoceros, a water buffalo, an elephant, a tiger and two antelopes near his feet.<sup>1</sup> In the Rigvedic age the elephants are considered as divine. Airavata, a divine white elephant was the mount of the god Sakka/Indra. Airavata was a celestial elephant and was emerged during process of *samudramanthana* (churning of ocean). A special value is given to the white elephants because of their mythical origin from *samudramanthana*. White elephants are endowed with miraculous power and divinity. Abhramu, the consort of Airavata is instrumental of producing clouds. She knits the clouds to produce monsoon that is necessary for vegetation. Her benevolence disappears drought and famine.<sup>2</sup> Airavata was born by the god Brahma when he sang seven sacred hymns over two halves of the egg shell hatched by Garuda. From right emerged eight elephants including Airavata and eight female elephants emerged from the left.

The sixteen constituted the eight couples and became the ancestors of all elephants, both in heaven and on the earth. They also became *Dig-Gajas* monitoring the direction of the space and symbolized as the mounts of the guardian deities who preside over the eight points- four cardinal and four intermediate direction of the cosmos, viz. East-Indra, Southeast-Agni, South-Yama, Southwest-Surya, West-Varuna, Northwest-Vayu, North-Kubera, and Northeast-Soma.<sup>3</sup> His mother's name was Iravati. Airavata symbolizes metronymic appellation arising from his mother and may also reflects rivers like Irrawady of Myanmar or Ira (Ravi) of Punjab or some divine drink arising from cosmic milky ocean.<sup>4</sup> The *Vicnu Purāna* mentions Airavata, a white elephant with seven trunks and was made the king of all elephants by Prithu.<sup>5</sup> Airavata has also been mentioned in the *Dīgha Nikāya*.<sup>6</sup> The

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*Vimānavatthu* says divine elephants as *sabbaseta gajuttama*, *kunjara*, and *naga gajavara*.<sup>7</sup> Zimmer says that as Airavata was the mount of Indra because of that the elephants are possessed by the kings. They are the king's symbol of strength and mount in battles. The kings watch and manage the war riding on elephant. The king's elephant also invites their celestial relatives, the clouds, the heavenly elephants for victory. They are necessary for welfare of the subjects and by abandoning a white elephant, the king earns notoriety and unpopularity.<sup>8</sup> Airavata is used to designate both the rainbow which symbolized Sakka's weapon and also a type of lightening. These are the two most conspicuous luminous manifestation of thunderstorm and rain. The elephant is also considered as a rain cloud walking on the earth and because of it elephant is frequently mentioned in rituals for rain.<sup>9</sup> This symbolism and identification have been well represented in the Brahmanical as well as Buddhist architecture. The elephants are depicted on either side of the goddess Lakcmi, aspersing her with water pouring from their trunks or from vases held in their trunks. Lakcmi aspersed by flanking elephants is considered to be the feature of the Buddhist architecture founding place in Sanchī, Bharhut etc.<sup>10</sup> Lakcmi is synonymous with Gaja-Lakcmi because both are depicted together. The elephants are also seen flanking *stūpa* or some other representation of the Buddha in either iconic or aniconic form. In Kanheri it is shown with the *bodhi* tree, the aniconic representation of enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> At some nativity sculptures Māyādevī and the future Buddha are depicted receiving sprinkles of water from trunks of divine elephants.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes Gaja-Lakcmi is represented on *stūpa* as a decorative motif.<sup>13</sup> The water poured from elephant's trunk is auspicious and a lustration with the ambrosial rain that provided immortality with water of life coming from celestial elephant clouds.

Sometimes words like 'naga' and 'hasti' are not only used as synonyms but also has different meanings as *nāga* means snake and *hasti* corresponds to elephant. Adrian says:

*'The word 'naga' means both snake and elephant, in myth and symbol their meaning coalesce. They both are linked with water; transposed to the level of celestial reference, the snake as the rainbow and the elephant is the cloud, both equally the source of life giving rain and dew. The elephant's trunk is associated with the rainbow –serpent both by its ophidian shape and by its ability to suck up water. The primordial; elephant Airavata has seven trunks, reminiscent of the nimbus of seven serpent heads that adorns the head of nagas.'*<sup>14</sup>

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1. Jonathan M. Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization*, Oxford: OUP, 1998, pp.112-13

2. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, Delhi: MLBD, 1999, p.106

3. *Ibid.*, pp.104-05

4. *Ibid.*, p.104

5. *Vicnu Purāna*, I.9, *Matsya Purāna*, CCXLIX, 13-38.

6. *Dīgha Nikāya*, II,258

7. *Vimānavatthu*, I.5, IV.3

8. Heinrich Zimmer, *op. cit.*, p.107

9. *Ibid.* pp.106-07

10. Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of Stūpa*, New York: Cornell University, 1985, p.316

11. *Ibid.* p.316-17

12. Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922, p.46

13. Foucher, *The Beginning of Buddhist Art and Other Essays in Indian and Central Asian Archaeology*, Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1994, p.70

14. Adrian Snodgrass, *op. cit.*, p.316

A very interesting example is found in Buddhism. The dyad of snake and elephant have been well established at *stūpa* of Rāmagama. Zuanxang mentions that the *stūpa* of Rāmagama containing the relics of the Buddha was protected by the snake king and the herds of elephants used to come here to strew flowers and sprinkle water at the *stūpa*. When Aśoka came here to carry off the relics of the lord, the dragon snake transformed as a brāhamana and came in front of the elephant of Aśoka. He begged Aśoka not to harm it and his petition was granted.<sup>15</sup> Aśoka also instructs that *nāgavana* (elephant forest) could not be destroyed and elephant residing there could not be killed.<sup>16</sup> Elephants were not only symbolized at cosmic level but their valuable contribution was required for strengthening kingship and economic progress. They were involved in multifarious activities like serving the army of the kings, transportation of goods, and religious rituals.

With the emergence of the state formation in the Ganga Valley, the importance of elephants was realized by the *mahājanpadas*. Magadha played decisive role for building of empire because of availability of iron mines and elephants. Economic and political viability of elephants were not only ascertained at the state level and various mechanism was evolved to maintain separate elephant corp. Elephant was considered as one of the jewels of *cakkavati* king. The *Dīgha Nikāya* mentions that one element common between the *cakkavati* king and the Buddha is that both possess the *mahāpurusha lakkhana*. A *cakkavati* monarch maintains seven *ratana* (seven jewels). These are *cakka ratana* (ideal wheel), *hatthi ratana* (ideal elephant), *assa ratana* (ideal horse), *mani ratana* (ideal gem), *idhi ratana* (ideal wife), *gahapati ratana* (ideal house holder) and *parinayaka ratana* (ideal councillor).<sup>17</sup> Elephant here considered as the most auspicious and ideal possession by the king.

Under the patronage of King Bimbisāra, influence of Magadha grew rapidly. He was the first king who realized the importance of the elephants in warfare. In the marshy and grassy land of Magadha elephants helped the army to maneuver the battle in their favour. Bimbisāra domesticated war elephants on large scale and since his period elephants became a separate and permanent unit of Indian army. AEga, the adjoining *janapada* of Magadha had strong presence of elephants. It is said that king Romapada of AEga began to domesticate elephants and sage Pālakāpya developed science to learn about elephants and shared this knowledge to the people.<sup>18</sup> Elephants might be one of the reasons that led to annexation of Anga by Bimbisāra. Trautmann's assumption might be true that domestication of elephants began in the later Vedic age around 1000 BCE. The techniques to capture elephants was invented, especially the wild male tusker and they were trained for warfare and slowly this idea was diffused in all parts of Indian subcontinent.<sup>19</sup> Though war technique involving the elephants might have started in later Vedic age but capture and domestication of elephants were well established in the Indus Valley Civilization. This idea was further proliferated not only in the Indian subcontinent but other parts of Asia. India was pioneer who disseminated the technique of capturing elephants, train them and used them in different activities including warfare. The records of Persia, Macedonia, and

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<sup>15</sup>. Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, Delhi: LPP, 2004, Vol. II, pp.20-21

<sup>16</sup>. E. Hultzsch, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* (Inscription of Asoka) Delhi: ASI, 2000, Vol. I, PEV, p.126 (*nāga vanasi kevatabhgasi yāni amnāni pi jīva nikāyani no haAtaEyāni*)

<sup>17</sup>. *Dīgha Nikāya*, II, 172

<sup>18</sup>. Thomas R. Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings, An Environmental History*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2015, pp.180-86

<sup>19</sup>. *Ibid.* pp.68-69

Greece gave vivid account of use of elephants in warfare. These incidents were immortalized in numismatic, sculptures and architecture of these regions. Ctesias of Cnidus was the royal physician of Achaemenid king Artaxerxes II (415-398 BCE). He never visited India but enquired the Indian travellers in the court about elephants and other animals. He was the first non-Indian who wrote about Indian war elephants. He says that Indian elephants were battle hardened and could overturn the palm tree at the instruction of his *mahaout*.<sup>20</sup> He also informs that Indian kings sent elephants accompanied by their *mahaout* to their counter parts at Persia. The Persians had very little knowledge of Indian elephants, so Indian *mahaout* was instrumental to tame and train them. Ctesias also informs that in the battle with Derbikes of Hyrcania at south of the Caspian Sea, Cyrus faced wrath of war elephants of Indian ally of Derbikes. In this battle Cyrus himself was wounded and killed by a javelin thrown upon him by one of the Indian soldiers in 530 BCE. The Derbikes were led by Amoraiois and supported by war elephants of his Indian allies.<sup>21</sup> Ctesias also tells a mythical story about an Assyrian queen Semiramis who led a war against Indian king Stabrobates.

The purpose of the war was to exploit the natural resources of India which was full of incredible numbers of elephants even surpassing Libyan elephants in power and physical appearance. Indian king maintained a huge army and a vast contingent of war elephants. To counter the formidable attack of Indian war elephants, Semiramis ordered to kill 300000 black oxen and their skin was sewn to make replica of elephants who looked real. These replicas were put on camels to befool the Indian soldiers but the plot was detected by the Indian soldiers and the queen's army was thoroughly routed.<sup>22</sup> The war was not supposed to be real as this reference is not even remotely mentioned in Indian literature.<sup>23</sup> But it gives impression that Indian elephants were precious in the Greek and the Persian region and they were better in physical appearance and strength than their counterparts in Libya and other African regions.

The Nandas maintained a huge contingent of war elephants and it was one of their most important wings of the army with cavalry, infantry and chariot. Alexander also realized the importance of elephants in warfare. He must have learnt about the strength of war elephants from his teacher Aristotle. When he fought the battle of Gaugamela with Darius III, he made effective maneuvering to counter the menace of elephants of the Persians and his Indian Allies. In his further marches towards the north-west frontier of Indian subcontinent, he tried to possess as many elephants as he could either from his friendly alliances, or as a tribute or by capture.<sup>24</sup> Arrian informs that Darius III fought with Alexander in 331 BCE with an Indian contingent of fifteen elephants and others of his own.<sup>25</sup> One strange phenomenon was that these elephants were managed by Indian *mahaouts* that led to the assumption that the Persians and the Greeks did not learn the technique to tame and train the elephants for war.

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew Nichols, *The Complete Fragments of Ctesias of Cnidus: Translation and Commentary With an Introduction*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Florida, 2008, pp.141, 219-21

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p.90

<sup>22</sup> Diodorus, II.6, II.1-18

<sup>23</sup> Thomas R. Trautmann, op. cit. p.223

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p.223

<sup>25</sup> Arrian, III.8.8

They were heavily depended upon the Indian *mahaouts* who were usually gifted or sent by the Indian kings to their Persian friends or captured with the elephants in the war. Diodorus says that the army of Porus had 50000 infantry, 3000 cavalry, 1000 chariots and 130 elephants.<sup>26</sup> When Alexander fought with Porus on the bank of Jhelum, both armies encamped on opposite sides and formidable elephants of Porus compelled the soldiers of Alexander not to cross the river to directly confront Porus. Alexander conspired to cross Jhelum in the night maintaining some distance from the main battle field and reached on opposite bank by morning. When Porus was informed, he sent his advance guards of chariots to counter them but rain spoiled his luck and his heavy chariots stuck in mud and marshy land. The final assault was with 4000 cavalry, 300 chariots and 200 elephants but luck did not favour him and Porus lost the day. It seems that Alexander avoided direct confrontation with elephants of Porus and his strong cavalry forces broke the battle array of Porus which was heavily depend upon elephants. The forces of Alexander attacked elephants of Porus with long spears and battle axes specially made for the purpose. Till last minute of the battle Porus fought with Alexander from the saddle of his elephant.<sup>27</sup>

It is evident that the Indians, the Persians, and the Greeks followed the same strategy to apply elephant force in the battle. According to written instruction issued to soldiers in the battle of Gaugamela, the army of Darius III was following *danda vryuha* in which elephants were positioned at the interval of thirty meters, the infantry behind the cavalry and chariots in the wings.<sup>28</sup> Foreign writers inform that the kings of north-west maintained a large number of elephants and fought ferociously with Alexander. When king Oxykenos was defeated by Alexander, his elephants were captured.<sup>29</sup> Ambhi, the king of Takshasila gifted 200 talents of silver, 3000 oxen and 56 elephants.<sup>30</sup> His neighbour Abhisara also gifted 40 elephants to Alexander.<sup>31</sup> He retreated with 200 elephants to Babylon.<sup>32</sup> Diodorus also informs that after death of Alexander, his hearse was ornamented with four large painted tablets exhibiting four organs of the army-infantry, cavalry, chariot and elephants.<sup>33</sup> Ptolmy (320 BCE) also issued a coin of Alexander wearing a scalp of elephant.<sup>34</sup> Since this period elephants became a main asset for their army and to possess them became a longing desire for the Bactrian and the Greek kings.

Alexander's penetration in Indian territories and knowledge acquired by their commanders and geographers opened new vistas into political and cultural relation between India and the west. The demand of Indian elephants grew in the west who were fighting with each other to possess the territories acquired by Alexander. The use of Indian elephants and technique to use them were adopted by many kingdoms of the west. The Mediterranean used their war elephants spreading them out in center or wings or both. They were used to destroy the infantry rank and to frighten the horses. The elephants were also deployed to demolish enemy's entrenchment and battle garrisons during war.<sup>35</sup> This spectacular

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26. Arrian, VI.15.4(tr. E. J. Chinok, *Anabasis of Alexander*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883)

27. Thomas R. Trautmann, op. cit. p.226

28. Arrian, op. cit., III.11.3

29. Arrian, op. cit., VI.15.6

30. Curtius, VIII.12.42

31. Arrian, V.20

32. Diodorus, XIX.4.8

33. Diodorus, XVIII.27

34. Thomas R. Trautmann. op. cit. P.227

35. Philip Rance, 'Elephants in Warfare in Late Antiquity' p. 360, *Acta Ant. Hung.* Vol. 43, 2003, p.355-384

phenomenon continued after Alexander but the supply of elephant to the west was minimized or only to be given in a friendly manner as mighty Mauryan empire emerged in the Indian subcontinent. They maintained a huge contingent of elephants to expand and defend the empire rather than supplying them to petty and warring kingdoms of the west.

In the Indian subcontinent, Bimbisara was the pioneer in domesticating elephants for both domestic use and war. His successors strengthened his idea as elephant forces were difficult to counter and accessible to break the strong ranks of the army and their fortifications. The Nandas had a formidable number of elephants and fear of it was reported among the soldiers of Alexander. Foreign writers give different accounts about the number of elephants in their army but appropriate numbers seem to be between 3000-4000 elephants. Diodorus,<sup>36</sup> Curtius,<sup>37</sup> Plutarch,<sup>38</sup> and Pliny<sup>39</sup> mentions 3000, 4000, 6000 and 9000 elephants respectively possessed by the Nandas. The Mauryans had an increased number of elephants in their army. Kautilya mentions a number of measures to capture, tame and train the elephants for various purposes.. The *Arthaśāstra* mentions four types of *vana* – *pasuvana* (forest of wild animals), *mrgavana* (forest of domesticated animals), *dravyavana* (forest of economic importance), and *hastivana* (elephant forest).<sup>40</sup> He places due importance to *hastivana* and advised to plant them at the border of the empire for strategic and military requirements. He instructed the officials to maintain records of every elephant and to keep registers for it.<sup>41</sup> His order to record the numbers might be for state owned elephants, otherwise it was very difficult as elephant were unaccountable in numbers those days and it was not possible to maintain record of each one. The *Arthaśāstra* gives an elaborate account and safety of forests where the elephants live. He informs that-

*‘Guards of elephant forests, assisted by those who rear elephants, those who enchain the legs of elephants, those who guard the boundaries, those who live in forests, as well as by those who nurse elephants, shall, with the help of five or seven female elephants to help in tethering wild ones, trace the whereabouts of herds of elephants by following the course of urine and dung left by elephants and along forest tracts covered over with branches of Bhallataki (Semicarpus Anacardium), and by observing the spots where elephants slept or sat before or left dung, or where they had just destroyed the banks of rivers or lakes. They shall also precisely ascertain whether any mark is due to the movements of elephants in herds, of an elephant roaming single, of a stray elephant, of a leader of herds, of a tusker, of a rouge elephant, of an elephant in rut, of a young elephant, or of an elephant that has escaped from the cage. Experts in catching elephants shall follow the instruction given to them by the elephant doctor (anikāstha), and catch such elephants as are possessed of auspicious characteristics and good character. The victory of kings (in battles) depends mainly upon elephants; for elephant, being of large bodily frame, are capable not only to destroy the arrayed army of an enemy, his fortifications and*

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<sup>36</sup>. Diodorus, XVII.93

<sup>37</sup>. Curtius, IX.2

<sup>38</sup>. Plutarch, 62-63

<sup>39</sup>. Pliny, VI.22

<sup>40</sup>. *Arthaśāstra*, II.6, tr. R. Shamasastri, Delhi: LPP, 2012

<sup>41</sup>. *Ibid.* II.20

*encampments, but also to undertake works that are dangerous to life. Elephants bred in countries, such as Kalinga, Anga, Karusa, and the East are the best; those of Dasarna and western countries are of middle quality; and those of Saurashtra and Panchajana countries are of low quality.*'<sup>42</sup>

Trautmann identifies these forest zones as *pracyavana* which comprises the region of Brahmaputra river in the east and Prayāga in the west, Himalaya in the north and the Ganga in the south. *Kalingavana* includes Bay of Bengal as border up to Utkala, Vindhya and the Sahya hills. It also includes the western Ghats from the river Tapi to the Cape including Deccan. The Cedi-Karusavana is area along the Yamuna river comprising Cedi region up to the south of Allahabad. The *Dasarnavana* includes area of Dasarna having its border at Mahendragiri (Eastern Ghat), the Vindhya mountain and Betwa river. *Angareyavana* comprises the area between Narmada and Pariyatra to Vidisha. *Aparantavana* is the western coast of Deccan up to Konkan region. *Saurastravana* includes Kathiawar and Avanti region and *Pancanadavana* comprises Kurukhetra to north of Delhi and adjoining Himalayan region.<sup>43</sup> Kautilya further asserts that any person who set fire of pasture land, fields, yards prepared for threshing, houses, forests of timber or of elephants shall be thrown into fire.<sup>44</sup> He is also cautious about the elephants and forests and mentions about two types of forests one producing timber and others elephants. The first one is sources of livelihood and helpful in construction of houses but elephant forests are opposite to it. One must plant timber forests everywhere but not the elephant forests. The elephant forests are precarious but precious as because they led to destruction of enemy's strength.<sup>45</sup> It is objectively introspected that the kings of India were fond of elephants and because of that they also required forests.

The forests were conserved by the kings though it may be place of exile and danger. The pragmatic and political acumen forced the kings to foster the forest as well as the elephants.<sup>46</sup> By this way a relationship between the Nature and man developed which is still surviving since thousands of years. Megasthenes also informs that India abundantly produces good quality elephants. They were well nourished and many of them were trained for war. These elephants often turned the tide of war in favour of India.<sup>47</sup> Megasthenes also informs that domestication of elephant was monopolized by the state and common people could not domesticate elephants.<sup>48</sup> This information does not seem to be correct as references of domestication of elephants by commoner and religious institutions are quite known in ancient India. Kautilya also does not inform any sort of monopolization over elephants but says that who kills an elephant will be put to death. He rewards four and a half *panas* to those who bring in the pair of tusks of an elephant dead from natural causes.<sup>49</sup> Foreign travellers inform that the Mauryans maintained over 9000 elephants. Pliny, Diodorus, Curtius, and Plutarch inform that the Mauryan emperors maintained 9000, 2000, 2000 and 8000 elephants respectively. Strabo informs

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. II.2

<sup>43</sup> Thomas R. Trautmann, 'Elephants and the Mauryans' Appendix, Mahesh Rangrajan and K. Sivaramkrishnan, ed. *Indian Environmental History*, New Delhi, Vol. I, 2012, pp.152-81

<sup>44</sup> *Arthaśāstra*, IV.11

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. VII.11

<sup>46</sup> Thomas R. Trautmann, *Elephants and the Kings*, p.51

<sup>47</sup> Diodorus, II.36.1

<sup>48</sup> Thomas R. Trautmann, op. cit. pp.257-58

<sup>49</sup> *Arthaśāstra*, II.2

that Seleucus fought a war with Andracottas (Chandragupta) in 305 BCE. He ceded territories of Arachosia, Gedrosia, Paropanisadae and Aria. Chandragupta Maurya gifted 500 elephants to him.<sup>50</sup> Ceding the territories covering Gandhara, Kabul, Heart and Baluchistan means Seleucus was defeated by Chandragupta Maurya who also married his daughter to Chandragupta Maurya. To reciprocate such auspicious event he gifted 500 elephants to Seleucus. Trautmann is hypothetical by suggesting that after this event the Mauryans became regular supplier of elephants to Selucids. He says that in 212-202 BCE, the Selucid king Antiochus III concluded treaty with Demetrius, son of Eutheydemus of Bactria and taken all elephants belonged to him. He also came to India and renewed his friendship with Sophagasenes (Subhagsena) and received many elephants as a gift. Subhagsena was identified as a Mauryan ruler.<sup>51</sup> In Indian historical context the identification of Subhagsena as a Mauryan king is still not clear and seems to be difficult too.

The elephant finds a profound place in Indian art and architecture. In Buddhism its depiction started as a nativity symbol showing the birth of the Buddha. In the age of Aśoka this art was proliferated in whole Indian subcontinent as elephants were sculptured for his pillars, engraved on rocks and carved out as an independent image. The representation of elephant in Buddhism started with the idea that Māyādevī saw a white elephant (*bodhisattva*) in a dream entering in her womb. It shows the birth of the Buddha and the elephant has been universally acknowledged as the symbol of birth or dream of Māyādevī, the mother of the Buddha. Aśoka placed this symbol not only at the place of the birth of the Buddha but also at the places where respect and divinity of Māyādevī and Prajapati Gautami could be represented..

The elephant sculpture has been discovered from Lumbinī. The Rummendei Pillar edict informs that it was a birth place of the Buddha.<sup>52</sup> S. Paranautana was one of the first scholars who identified Lumbinī as the birth place of the Buddha.<sup>53</sup> P. C. Mukherji excavated the site and brought into light the remains of plinth of the Māyādevī temple and also discovered ante-chamber of the temple. He says that the image of Māyādevī that ordained the temple belongs to 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and probably sculptured under patronage of Aśoka .<sup>54</sup> Though pillar of Aśoka at Lumbinī is presently devoid of any animal sculpture but several fragments of ancient sculptures discovered around the pillar and Māyādevī temple suggests animal capital of Aśoka 's pillar was an elephant though small in size.<sup>55</sup> The nativity sculptures have been discovered from many sites showing elephant. The conception of the Buddha (*garbha-ava pradnti*) and the nativity (*jāti*) representing the *bodhisattva* descending into right side of his mother's bosom in form of little elephant have been depicted from many places. Sometimes in Amaravati<sup>56</sup> four Lokpalas have been depicted and sometimes elephant is absent or not visible due to its small size as in case of Bharhut<sup>57</sup> and Sanchī.<sup>58</sup>

50. Strabo, V.2.9

51. Thomas R. Trautmann, op. cit. pp.235-36

52. *Epigraphia Indica* (1898-99), Vol.V, Delhi: ASI, 2000, p.2

53. S. Paranautana, 'Rummendei Pillar Inscription of Aśoka ' *Journal of American Oriental Society*, Vol. 82 (2), 1962, pp.163-67

54. P.C. Mukherji, *A Report on a tour of Exploration on the Antiquities of Kapilvastu, Terai of Nepal*, Varanasi: ASI, 1969, pp.36-39

55. Harry Falk, *Aśokan Sites and Artifacts*, Mainz: Verlag Philip Von Zabren, 2006, P.178

56. Foucher, op. cit. pl.III (A3)

57. Foucher, op. cit. pl.XXVIII.2

58. Foucher, op. cit. pl.IX,2



The depiction of Māyādevī's dream representing her sleeping on the bed and an elephant descending from heaven is shown on a sculpture of Bharhut of 2<sup>nd</sup> or 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. It inscribes a short inscription *bhagvato ukraAti* (descent of the Buddha).<sup>59</sup> The nativity scene has also been depicted on the right pillar of the eastern gate of the main *stūpa* of Sanchī.<sup>60</sup> Amaravatī and Gandhāra had also nativity sculptures.<sup>61</sup> In a fragmentary slab found from Sārnāth, the lower portion represents nativity scene in which Māyādevī is sleeping on the bed surrounded by her attendants taking fan and *chāmāras* and above an elephant is depicted.<sup>62</sup> Aśoka raised pillars with elephant capital at places where any miraculous performances by the Buddha for his mother or any incident regarding Māyādevī happened. At Sankisa, it is believed that the Buddha descended from Trayasatrimsa heaven after preaching his mother Māyādevī by the ladder of gold or jewels accompanied by the gods Sakka and Brahma. It is known that Māyādevī died seven days after birth of Sidhattha and resided at Trayasatrimsa heaven.<sup>63</sup> Faxian mentions that the Buddha went to Trayasatrimsa heaven to preach his mother and after three months he descended on the earth with Sakka and Brahma.

On this occasion three precious ladders appeared in the sky. The Buddha was standing in the middle ladder made of seven precious jewels. Brahma descended on silver ladder on the right and Sakka appeared on left on golden ladder.<sup>64</sup> Faxian also mentions that Aśoka built a *vihāra* over the divine ladders. And in the middle of it raised a sixteen feet high image of the Buddha. Behind the *vihāra*, he erected a stone pillar 30 cubits high and on the top of it lion capital was placed. On the four sides of the pillar four images of the Buddha were placed and the pillar was shining as glass.<sup>65</sup> Zuanxang also mentions that Aśoka built a huge *vihāra* and raised a stone pillar with a lion (elephant) capital.<sup>66</sup>

Alexander Cunningham discovered the polished stone pillar of Aśoka at Sankisa. It is about 70 feet high bearing the figure of an elephant. It is well sculptured and the veins of the legs are well conceived and chiselled. The toes of the feet are well carved out but the elephant lost the trunk. It may be judged from the position of the legs that elephant was represented as standing with his trunk hanging down. He explores the following possibility about this lion pillar.

1. The elephant capital is not same as the lion capital.
2. The height of the elephant pillar is same as that of the lion pillar, quoted by Faxian i.e. 30 cubits or 45-60 feet.
3. The trunk of the elephant was lost before arrival of Chinese pilgrims and figure of animals might have been mistaken by Faxian and Zuanxang.
4. There may be another pillar with the elephant capital.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Alexander Cunningham, *Stūpa of Bharhut: A Buddhist Monument Ornamented with Numerous Sculptures*, Oxford: W.H. Allen, 1879, pl. XXVIII,2

<sup>60</sup> John Marshall, *A Guide to Sanchī*, Calcutta: Government Superintendent Press, 1918, p.71

<sup>61</sup> Foucher, op. cit. , pl.III, p.19

<sup>62</sup> *ASLAR* (1906-07), Delhi: ASI, 2000, pl.XXVIII,5, p.93

<sup>63</sup> Alexander Cunningham, *Four Reports Made During the Years 1962-63-64-65*, Delhi: ASI, 2000, Vol. I, p.71

<sup>64</sup> Samuel Beal, *Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-Yun From China to India*, Delhi: LPP, 2003, p.64

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p.65

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Watters, op. cit., p.334

<sup>67</sup> Alexander Cunningham op. cit. Vol.I, pp.277-78

The possibility of lion pillar seems to be distant because legend happened in Sankisa is related to Māyādevī i.e. symbol of an elephant. So it is imminent that it was originally an elephant capital. Because of lack of trunk it was misjudged by Faxian and Zuanxang. This view is also supported by number of sculptures and seals discovered from Sankisa. A broken sculptured scene made of stone has been excavated from Sankisa. Though whole of the right edge is broken but remaining part suggests lofty structure approached by a long flight of steps. The stairs have a railing on each side and a small domed structure supported on row of pillars. Each story has a railing in front. There was a third story at uppermost level but its sculpture is quite indistinct. There is an image of the Buddha in the middle with his right hand raised in *abhayamudra* and to the left there is a second figure seated with her hand raised in adoration. Cunningham says the scene represents the Trayasatrimsa heaven where the Buddha is preaching his mother Mayādevi.<sup>68</sup> The figures of palm tree and peacock are visible in the sculpture but elephant is not distinguished. It may be too small or damaged.

Another seal is found from Pakna Bihar, Sankisa. It is made of baked clay depicting a scene of three flight of steps symbolizing the Buddha descending from heaven accompanying Brahma and Sakka. In the middle of the seal there are three steps of a ladder leading down from a platform surrounded by railings. Over each flight of steps there is a single letter of the Gupta Nagari character, to the left 'Bra' for Brahma, in the middle 'Bu' for the Buddha and in the right 'Sa' for Sakka.<sup>69</sup> The scene is depicting the legend of the Buddha's visit to Trayasatrimsa heaven. The Nagari character shows that the Buddhist influence was continued in Sankisa in the Gupta and later Gupta period and probably after decline of the Vardhans that it was absorbed into Brahmanical fold or lost into oblivion.

Faxian and Zuanxang inform that in the Jetavana, Srāvastī Aśoka raised two pillars. At one pillar *dhammacakka* capital was placed and on other there is debate over animal capital that of an elephant or bull. Faxian says that the entrance gate of Jetavana Vihāra was flanked by two stone pillars raised by Aśoka. On the left pillar capital of *dhammacakka* was raised while on the right side image of an ox was made.<sup>70</sup> Beal also refers to Zuanxang that pillar was seventy feet high and had been erected by Aśoka. On the top of one he made a dome and on the other an elephant. It seems that the trunk of elephant was broken, so Faxian could not identify the elephant capital.<sup>71</sup> But Thomas Watters refutes the opinion of Beal and Leggie that Leggie's opinion is not explainable while Beal misinterpreted the fact about elephant. He says that Zuanxang mentions that the Jetavana Vihāra was flanked by two pillars built by Aśoka and the pillar of the left side was surmounted by a sculpture of *dhammacakka* and the right side by a bull.<sup>72</sup> However the probability of elephant capital on the pillar is more because of following reasons

1. Srāvastī was always related to nativity as well as Māyādevī, the mother of the Buddha. Zuanxang informs that near Jetavana Vihāra, the temple of Māyādevī was built by Pasenadi, king of Kosala. In this temple five feet high image of the Buddha descending from Trayasatrimsa heaven to preach his mother was adorned.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>68</sup>. Alexander Cunningham, *Report of Tours in Gangetic Provinces from Badaon to Bihar, 1875-76, and 1877-78*, Delhi: ASI, 200. Vol. XI, pp.26-29

<sup>69</sup>. Ibid., p.36

<sup>70</sup>. Samuel Beal, op. cit. p.75

<sup>71</sup>. Ibid. pp.75-76

<sup>72</sup>. Thomas Watters, op. cit. p.383

<sup>73</sup>. Ibid., p.384, Samuel Beal, op. cit. p. 93

2. Srāvastī was abode of Prajapati Gotami, the foster mother of the Buddha. Zuanxang says that king Pasenadi built monastery for Prajapati Gotami when she became *bhikkhuni*.<sup>74</sup>
3. The elephant figure carved out by Aśoka on pillar is not only related to Mayādevi but also a symbolic representation of the Buddha. In Srāvastī the Buddha spent maximum number of *vassāvāsa*, delivered some of his very important discourses and performed miracle to subdue heretics. So on these pillars the capitals of *dhammacakka* and elephants are supposed to be more appropriate.

Aśoka also engraved or carved out elephant figures on rocks especially at places where he put his edicts. A sculpture of an elephant was carved out by him bearing a short inscription ‘seto’ (white elephant) in Dhauli, Odisha.<sup>75</sup> It was done by Aśoka with some purpose. The depiction of elephant by Aśoka should not be considered as symbolism only in art but with greater significance. The identification of Dhauli elephant is with the Buddha rather than Aśoka. The figure suits the idea of *dhamma cakkavati* as visible from his Separate Rock Edict engraved here with other Major Rock Edicts. The Rock Edict XIII was intentionally dropped here because it mentions carnage happened in Kalinga.<sup>76</sup> B.M. Barua says that elephant carved out of rock bearing Aśoka’s inscription should not be taken as a symbolic representation the Buddha but a sculptural device innovated by Aśoka to draw attention of the people where edict was placed. It was nothing but a popular notion of *mangala*.<sup>77</sup> Nihar Ranjan Ray suggests that elephant carved out of rock at Dhauli symbolized that it walks majestically out of a deep ravine and represents the imperial majesty of Aśoka presenting himself in quite dignity before people of Kalinga.<sup>78</sup> But it seems to be incomprehensible because the Rock Edict XIII indicates that Aśoka is not posing himself with great dignity and honour but as a remorseful emperor due to violent outcome of Kalinga war. Aśoka was sympathetic and benevolent rather than haughty and outrageous. The Girnar rock inscribing rock edict of Aśoka mentions celestial white elephant (*sarvaseto hasti sarva loka sukha hara*) showing it harbinger of happiness to whole world.<sup>79</sup> However figure of elephant is missing because of erosion or destruction of block of rock bearing figure of white elephant. The inference could be drawn from it that the word ‘seto’ of Dhauli also represents the white elephant.<sup>80</sup> A short inscription ‘*gajtame*’ (best of elephants) with the elephant figure has been inscribed on the north face of Kalsi edict of Aśoka.<sup>81</sup> R.K. Mukherji says that the figure of elephant with the word ‘*gajtame*’ indicates that Aśoka is dedicating his edict to the Buddha.<sup>82</sup> The elephant figure is also engraved along with the figures of bull, horse and lion on *dhammacakka* pillar of Aśoka at Sārṇāth.<sup>83</sup> In the Barabar hills, above the entrance of Lomasha Rishi cave, a frieze decorated with row of elephants has been found. Though inscription is missing here but the cave is carved out to donate to the Ajivika monks at instruction of Aśoka. The hill near Erragudi containing the boulder bearing Aśoka’s inscription is locally known as Yenakonda (elephant hillock) or Nallayenakakonda (black elephant hills). It shows the possibility that there might be existing a figure of an elephant carved

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.377

<sup>75</sup> E. Hultzsch, op. cit. p.92

<sup>76</sup> K. K. Thaplyal. *Aśoka: The King and the Man*, New Delhi: Aryans Book International, 2012, p.172-73

<sup>77</sup> B.M. Barua *Aśoka and his Inscriptions*, Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1990, pp.75-78

<sup>78</sup> Nihar Ranjan Ray, *Maurya and Post Mauryan Arts, A Study in Social and Formal Contrasts*, Delhi: ICHR, 1975, p.28

<sup>79</sup> E. Hultzsch, op. cit. p.1

<sup>80</sup> K. K. Thapalyal, op. cit. p.71

<sup>81</sup> E. Hultzsch, op. cit. p. 27

<sup>82</sup> R.K. Mukherji, *Aśoka*, Delhi: MLBD, 2007, pp.61-62

out as per instruction of Aśoka.<sup>84</sup> The elephant is treated as synonym of omnipresence of the Buddha. The message that Aśoka giving to his people was like words of the Buddha as the elephant represented the *bodhisattva* whom Māyādevī saw in her dream. The *bodhisattva* descended from Tushita heaven in form of a white elephant to bring happiness to mankind (*Bodhisatto seto varavarano hutva*).<sup>85</sup>

The Tock Edict IV of Aśoka mentions elephant (*hasti*) as one of the items of spectacles that Aśoka showed to the people with a view to motivate them to be pious so they may attain heaven after death and acquainted with divine things including celestial elephant. D. R. Bhandarkar interprets it in light of the stories of the *Vimānavatthu* which narrates the glorious and enviable joy and happiness in different heavenly abodes where people living pious life on earth are entitled after their death.<sup>86</sup> Barua says that Aśoka showed elephant to the people as a celestial being, either all white or deep black, several as mounts to the gods and angels, the Airavata, the vehicle of Sakka with thirty three heads was symbolism of thirty three gods. Here symbolism of the Buddha with the white elephant must be ruled out.<sup>87</sup> But inscription says that all white celestial elephants shining in complexion resplendent like *agi* or *joti khamdhas*, the sun, the moon, star lighting or fire (*hasti-darsana agikhamdhani ca anani ca divyani rupani desayitpa janam*).<sup>88</sup> It shows that elephant is divine and must be symbol of the Buddha. These bliss were objectively presented before the people as stimulus to virtuous life. They might be actual elephant in procession or figure of celestial elephant, the vehicle of the Lokapalas or the white elephant symbolizing the Buddha.<sup>89</sup> The elephants represented on the pillars, rocks, and caves during period of Aśoka shows that he had impetus to set the Buddha as an ideal to express the best virtues of life to be attained by the common people. The elephant engraved on rocks or mentioned in inscriptions show the *bodhisattva* descending from the Tushita heaven to be a mortal Buddha for spreading compassion in the conflicting, superstitious, and ritualistic society of 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Human-elephant relationship proved to be highly productive for human societies and it was immortalized in ancient and medieval architecture, literature, and folklores. But at the same time some ill-conceived measures are causing the extinction of elephants and their number is dwindling every year. One of the fundamental causes is deprivation of their natural habitat. Reduction of the area leads to decrease in number of the elephants and in turn it leads to genetic impoverishment through inbreeding. The range loss, the shrinking habitat often marks the beginning of their downfall. One of the early propositions recommended by Kautilya is to engage the elephants in various activities but also protect them from poachers. They and their natural habitats must be saved. The *Hastyāyurveda* mentions worshipping of elephants for welfare of subjects. Rainfall, fertility of crops, the fecundity of cattle and man.

*‘If they did not pay worship to the elephant, the king and the kingdom, the army and the elephants, would be doomed to perish, because a divinity would have been disregarded.*

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83. Anand Singh, *Buddhism at Sārnāth*, Delhi: Primus Publications, 2014, p.100

84. K.K. Thaplyal. op. cit. p.172

85. *Jātaka*, I, 50

86. D. R. Bhandarkar, *Aśoka*, Delhi: Asian Education Services, 2005, p.308

87. B.M. Barua, op. cit., p.75

88. E. Hultzsch, op. cit. p.69 (Girnar)

89. R.K. Mukherji, op. cit. pp.136-37

*Contrariwise, if due worship is paid to the elephant, they will thrive and prosper together with their wives and sons, the country, the army, and the elephants. Crops will sprout in due time; Indra, the rain god, will send rain in due time; there will be no plague, no drought. They will live a hundred years (a full lifetime) with many sons and many cattle and will have a sturdy progeny*<sup>90</sup>

To follow dictum set by Kautilya and other ethical thinkers is a need of time. Humans have to be less interfering and more benevolent towards elephants and their habitats.

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*Vicnu Purāna*, I.9, *Matsya Purāna*, CCXLIX, 13-38.

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<sup>90</sup> *Hastyāyurveda*, IV.22