

GAJA as Depicted in Indian Arts and Crafts

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Gaja or elephant has been an integral part of Indian arts, crafts, culture and heritage since time immemorial. Indian sculptures are lavishly ornamented. The richness and exuberance of temple sculptures are largely due to depiction of animate and inanimate world. Animal carvings especially elephants and their various combinations are largely depicted on the walls of caves, temples and monasteries. The preponderance of elephant motifs on the railings of temples and monasteries shows a cultural association of people with elephants and their availability in plenty both in the wild and in captivity.

If we look into the lexicons, the hymns of the *Rigveda* mentions that a white elephant as the carrier or *Vahana* of lord Indra, the warrior God of the heaven (Craven, *Concise History of Indian Art*, 6). The remains of Indus Valley Civilization (c.2500 to 1500 BC) unearthed from Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa (in modern Pakistan) provides the earliest and careful representation of elephant on seals and amulets. They make us believe that the elephants either attracted the admiration of the people of the valley for its gigantic size and strength or where depiction of elephants on amulets were probably propitiatory in nature. (Sen, *Animal Motifs in Ancient Indian Art*, 5). An outstanding seal from Mohenjo-Daro shows a central figure seated in a yogic position, along with various animals like elephant, tiger, rhinoceros, buffalo and deer and probably earliest depiction of *Pasupati*.

In the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya (c. 300 BC) the elephants of Kalinga (Present Odisha) were admired as the best of the type in India (Trautmann, *Elephants and the Mauryas*, 254). It mentions that Kalinga was importing elephants from Ceylon during the Mauryan period. At the same time, we learn from the records of various historical events that elephants were being also exported from Orissa. The import of elephants in the third century BC can be explained by the fact that the demand of elephants by the Kalingan army was so large that it could not be met from local sources. Historicity of the elephants are also corroborated in various travellers account. Yuan Chwang, the Chinese pilgrim who visited India and the neighbouring countries in C. 639 CE. mentions that India produced large dark elephants, which were prized in the neighbouring countries. The Muslim geographers of the 9-10th Century CE also testify that large elephants were one of the chief commodities of trade in India.

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Elephant and its Symbolism

Elephant is also depicted in various symbols. Initially Lord Buddha was symbolised as elephant in sculpture and the *Jatakas* refers to the stories of Lord Buddha descending to the earth in the form of an elephant. There are several myths relating to elephants in Indian culture and society. The most popular belief indicates the sign of conception in womanhood by the visit of an elephant (Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols*, 66). Mayavati, Lord Buddha's mother said to have had one such dream before giving birth to her son. 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.

Elephants laden with various inherent meaning has been depicted in the finest temple sculptures and in monasteries in not only India but in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Indonesia and other places across South Asia. Series of elephant processions are commonly seen in the outer wall of the Hindu temples. Hence, the elephant motifs both from the religious and artistic point with special reference to its natural history need to be discussed. Of all the implications of the elephant symbol, the animal as the *Vahana* of Indra took a distinctive role in the religio-mythical tales of India. Artists preferred to associate the elephant with the mother goddess, not primarily as her *Vahana*, but as the symbolic source of fecundation by representing two or more elephants flanked on either side of the mother-goddess and bathing her with the waters of life. This is exemplified in the *Gajalakshmi* motif seen in different temples. (Behera, *Konark: The Heritage*, 9).

The symbolic and mystic role of the elephant in human affairs which has been coming down from time immemorial past appears to have influenced the gradual evolution of the concept of *Ganesha* and his idol in the present forms. The Asian elephant has been considered an auspicious animal and to signify good fortune.

The elephants was also considered as a religious symbol both in Brahmanical and Buddhist countries and was also trained for the purpose of war. It was being used as one of the four-fold armies (chariots, elephants, cavalry and infantry), a beast of burden and a trade item throughout history. In addition to this, "elephants are an attribute of royalty" (Rhys Davids & Oldenberg, *Sacred Book of the East*, 166).

At present, with the disappearance of princely order and mechanism of the army, the elephant's importance as a royal symbol and war material suffered a setback. But it still retains its importance as a religious paraphernalia. Apart from its esoteric role in the Hindu metaphysics it is considered an auspicious animal representing the phenomenal world. *Lakshmi*, the Hindu God of prosperity is reverentially addressed as *Gajalakshmi*. This idea is symbolised in pictures and other works of art with this Goddess flanked on either side by two elephants facing each other with trunks lifted in holy tribute to her.

Buddhists also hold these animals sacred as lords. Lord Buddha is said to have descended from heaven in the form of a white elephant into his mother's womb in answer to her prayers to *Ganesha* for a child. When Buddha as recognised as an *Avatar* of Vishnu by the Brahmanicals the status of the elephants also went a step high (Karunakaran, *ibid*, 7).

Elephants have also appeared in Indian coins since antiquity. The “*karshapana*” or punch-marked silver coin of India, dates back to 600 BCE to C. 300 CE. Simple but distinctive images of elephants appear, along with bulls, crescents, stars and the Sun. Elephants continue to appear on Indian coinage and currency right down until modern times. The earliest representation of elephant on Greek coinage was a result of Alexander’s campaign in India. (Markowitz, *Elephants on Ancient Coins*, 1)

Etymology of Elephant

Rankorath Karunakaran in his book *The Riddle of Ganesha* explained that *Ephom* is another Indian name for elephant. Elephant is an English word derived through Greek by adding the prefix ‘*EL*’ and the suffix ‘*Ant*’ to the ‘*Ephom*’. ‘*EL*’ is the primitive generic word for God in the Semitic language. Even in the Dravidian language ‘*EL*’ or ‘*ELP*’ indicates God. *Ellappan* and *Ellamman* are the names of two Dieties and are still worshipped in South India, *Ellappan* being the Father Deity and *Ellamman* being the Mother Diety.

Evolution of *Ganesha* Iconography

The motif of *Ganesha* or *Ganapati*, is an ingenious composition in conjoining the head of an elephant with the body of a human and it occupies the foremost position among all the hybrid representations in Indian Art. But when and how Elephant turned into a deity is quite interesting to study. Well elephant may have been a totemic animal during prehistoric period. Many times totemic animals were humanised and given great importance. A seal discovered from archaeological excavation of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa we find a figure of a ram with a human face and trunk - tusk of an elephant may be in the nascent stage of elephant God found in Indian subcontinent.

Taittiriya Aranyaka refers to a Deity called *Dentin* (one with a tusk) who is said to possess a twisted trunk (*Vakrathunda*). It is not clear whether this deity had the full form of the elephant or not. Probably this figure was a mixed figure in the pattern of the earlier figure found in the Indus Valley excavation, viz. the ram with the human face and with the trunk and tusk of the elephant. May be these figures represent *Ganesha* figure in their embryonic stage. Significantly enough only the trunk and tusk of the elephant appear to have been taken out for depiction, perhaps for the reason, that even in that distant past they had a special significance as at the present days. (Karunakaran, *Riddle of Ganesha*, 5)

Elephants and bulls are the prominent animals seen in the Indus Valley seals. The elephants seen in the several seals appear calm and docile in spite of their imposing appearance. They look just like the elephants kept in the Hindu temple for ceremonial purposes at the present time and it looks probable that keeping of elephants in places of worship for ceremonial purpose is a tradition that is being followed from the days of the pre historic times. (Karunakaran, *ibid*).

The History Behind

Probably the sacred animals of the Indus people faced challenge with the Aryan invasion who came from outside and swiped away the Indus people with their superior skills and valour. Indra was the Vedic God which got prominence. Phallus worship common among Semitic and Dravidian races was sidelined. But after the Aryan invasion many of the original inhabitants migrated to the south carrying their cultural and religious traditions with them. The elephant continued to be their sacred animal in the South which is proved by the ancient custom of the *Pattathu Anai* (State Elephant) selecting a ruler by placing a garland of flowers round his neck. The state elephant was considered as Devine medium and the people respected its verdict without demur. As time passed the elephants regained their lost importance and begun to play prominent roles in all affairs where man and God are involved. Some scholars believe elephants are respected among all animals due to their high intelligence and strong family ties. Thus few consider it is morally wrong for humans to cull them. The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle once said that elephants were the animal which surpasses all others in wit and mind.

Ganesha in Indian Plastic Art

Elephants have been represented repeatedly in Indian Art and sculpture. First organised Art activity in early India can be traced in the Mauryan period. The Mauryan period witnessed art activity in ancient India in a bigger scale and they used durable material, like stone. One of the important specimen of this Art has been exhibited at Dhauli near Bhubaneswar (the present Capital city of Odisha) which depicts forepart of an elephant and it contains Fourteenth Rock Edict of emperor Ashoka.

Although *Ganesha* iconography developed much later and not probably before 5th century CE (Brown, *Ganesh: Studies of Asian God*, 19). Sculptural Art prior to Gupta period (4th- 6th Cen. CE) are scanty but it still remains a fact that once it appeared in the Indian religious horizon, he gained immense popularity and its depiction in the sculptural art never diminished and continued unabated even to the modern times. The evolution of the image of *Ganesha* in the Indian plastic art has been quite gradual ever since the Gupta period. *Ganesha* in the early Gupta period emerged as a two armed deity with the usual head of an elephant, seated and holding a bowl of sweets in the left hand and a sweet ball in the right one. The head is without any decoration, but the fan like ears flank the elephant head. (Nagar, *Cult of Vinayaka*, 100).

The symbolic form and identity of *Ganesha*, in his classic form, is generally accepted to have occurred between the 4th- to 5th-century CE. Shanti Lal Nagar in *The Cult of Vinayaka*, explains that the earliest known iconic image of *Ganesha* is in the niche of the Shiva temple at Bhumra has been dated to the Gupta period. Independent cult was well established not before c.10th century.

Ganesha image in Bronze

It would be difficult to state from when *Ganesha* came to be represented in bronzes images but one of the earliest representations of *Ganesha* in Bronze belongs to 7th century from Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh. The God is shown elegantly seated over pedestal but the image is partially damaged. (Nagar, *Ibid*)

Ganesha in Terracotta Art

Probably the earliest image of Ganesha is a small terracotta bas relief found at the ancient site of Akra (previously North Western Frontier Province) where many pre Gupta artefacts has been unearthed. Another small burnt clay terracotta image belonging to 5th Century CE has been found from Parkahar. *Ganesha* being a popular deity has been also represented widely in seals and sealing, wood work, textiles and so on.

Elephant Motifs in Textiles

Elephant has been a widely used motif in traditional Indian textiles. Traditional motifs are deeply influenced by religious beliefs, culture, environment and activities of day to day life of the weavers and embroiderers. Indian artisans have created varied motifs and patterns which are exclusive in their styles and colour combinations. Motifs like lotus, conch shells, fish, elephants represent the religious philosophy of the people and they are integrally associated with concept of bringing good-luck, health and prosperity. Elephant is regarded as the mount of Kings in India, as an devastating component of war. Elephant came to symbolize the God of Warriors. It is a sign of wealth, power and influence reflecting royalty, inner strength and nobility. It is used to embellish printed, painted and embroidered textiles. Elephant motifs are mainly represented to depict war scenes, royal extravaganza, military expeditions and therefore represent power, both military and political.

Ivory Carvings

Elephants were also in demand because of highly prized ivory work. A group of rings and combs worked in Egypt about six thousand years ago is usually considered the earliest confirmed use of ivory in carvings (Lawley, *World of Elephants*, 120). Specimens of ivory work discovered at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro show that ivory craftwork was already well developed in India as early as five thousand years ago (Bedi, *Elephant, Lord of Jungle*, 69).

Two ivory carvings discovered outside India are a mirror handle, recovered from the volcanic ash of Pompeii, Italy, and a plaque, discovered in a cache at Begram, Afghanistan (Craven, *Ibid*). Both these carvings are traced to the Andhran sculpture of the 1st century BCE to 1st century CE. These discoveries indicate a sea trade route flowing from India through Alexandria in Egypt and ultimately to Rome on the one hand and on the other to a land based trade route to Central Asia, which joined the Chinese Silk Road with Indian trade centres and seaports in the Deccan.

Ganesha Beyond Indian Boundary

One of the earliest known *Ganesha* sculptures discovered in China dates back to C. 531 CE possibly carried by Fa Hein from India to China which emerged as a popular deity in the contemporary religious faiths and apparently even penetrated into Buddhism.

There is also a belief that Yaso Gupta and Buddhadandi with other Buddhist priests who left Ceylon in C. 640 CE and travelling through India, on their way to Tibet, also carried with them the replicas of the elephant-faced God with the intention of removing un-surmountable obstacle on their long, difficult and awe-inspiring but adventurous journey.

Elephants were associated with the art and architecture of the temple of the Tooth Relic in Sri Lanka since the early periods. For instance, the somewhat miraculous story related to King Mittasena (428-29 CE) reveals that there was a figure of an elephant made of stucco at the Temple of the Tooth Relic (Geiger, *Mahavamsa*, 38).

Ganesha has been depicted in various forms especially in frescoes found from various parts of the world. A medieval fresco from Paya-Thon-Zu temple and Amarapura monastery in Myanmar also depicts *Ganesha* with an elephant head but with a demonic look along with dragons. A fresco from Bazalik in Central Asia also probably represents *Ganesha* with an elephant head but with two trunks (Nagar, *Ibid*, 104).

Commercial and cultural contacts extended India's influence in Western and Southeast Asia. *Ganesha* is one of a number of Hindu deities who consequently reached foreign lands. *Ganesha* was particularly worshipped by traders and merchants, who went out of India for commercial ventures. From approximately the 10th century onwards, new networks of exchange developed including the formation of trade guilds and a resurgence of money circulation. During this time, *Ganesha* became the principal deity associated with traders. The earliest inscription invoking *Ganesha* before any other deity is associated with the merchant community. (Thapan, *Understanding Ganapati*, 152, 170).

Hindus migrated to South East Asia took their culture, including *Ganesha*, with them. (Getty, *Monograph on the Elephant*, 55) Statues of *Ganesha* are found throughout the region. The forms of *Ganesha* found in the Hindu Art of Java, Bali and Borneo show specific regional influences (Getty, *Gaṇeśa: A Monograph*, 55). The spread of Hindu culture throughout South East Asia established *Ganesha* worship in modified forms in Burma, Cambodia and Thailand. In Thailand, Cambodia, and among the Hindu classes of the *Chams* in Vietnam, *Ganesha* was mainly thought of as a remover of obstacles. Today in Buddhist Thailand, *Ganesha* is regarded as a remover of obstacles, the God of success (Brown, *Ganesh: Studies of an Asian God*, 182).

Before the advent of Islam, Afghanistan had close cultural ties with India, and the adoration of both Hindu and Buddhist deities was practiced. Sculptures from the 5th to the 7th centuries have survived, suggesting that the worship of *Ganesha* was then in vogue in the region (Nagar, *Ibid*, 175).

Ganesha appears in Mahayana Buddhism, not only in the form of the Buddhist God *Vināyaka*, but also as a Hindu demon form with the same name. His image appears in Buddhist sculptures during the late Gupta period. In Nepal, the Hindu form of *Ganesha*, known as *Heramba*, is popular; he has five heads and rides a lion (Getty, *Ibid*, 37). Tibetan representations of *Ganesha* show ambivalent views of him (Nagar, *Ibid*, 185). A Tibetan rendering of *Ganapati* is *tshogs bdag* (Wayman, *Chanting the Names of Manjushri*, 76).¹ *Ganesha* appears in China and Japan in forms that show distinct regional character. In northern China, the earliest known stone statue of *Ganesha* carries an inscription dated to 531.¹ In Japan, where *Ganesha* is known as *Kangiten*, the *Ganesha* cult was first mentioned in 806. (Martin-Dubost, *Ganesha: The Enchanter*, 313).

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