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REPRESENTATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMALS AND BIRDS IN TEMPLE ART: A Case Study of Paramara Temples

Humans have been in close contact with animals and birds since the early phase of their development. Representation of birds and animals can be seen in art all over the world since the stone-age. In India, some birds and animals gained importance due to their association with the divinities in one way or another. Animals played a key role in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist mythology. In Hindu mythologies, gods take the form of an animal or appear as part animals. In Buddhism, animals became an integral part of Buddhist Jatakas and in Jainism, all the Jinas have symbols of animals.

Some animals and birds serve as *vahanas* (vehicles) of divinities and sometimes they assist divinities and perform rituals. In many legends animals are said to be the great devotee of gods and goddesses. However, one can also find gods fighting with animals in some mythology. Animals are not only associated with the gods and goddesses but also with negative forces such as *asuras* (demons). Mythology narrates how *asuras* transform into powerful animals to fight divinities. The divine figures share an inseparable bond with the animals and birds which are linked with them and shown together.

Representation of birds, animals, syncretic and mythical creatures can be seen in temples as a common decorative motif used to adorn the pillars, ceilings, doorframes, entablatures and niches. These creatures are not only used as ornamentation but carefully chosen to represent a deeper meaning

and placed cautiously so that their symbolism works with the entire cosmos created in the temple.

It is noticeable that some creatures are favoured over the others in Indian temples and they are consciously chosen to reflect certain notions – for instance, power, royalty, spirituality and feminine beauty. Their depiction also reflects a clear hierarchy within them. The paper aims to bring to light the diverse imagery of fauna found in the Indian temples through the case study of Paramara temples and to explain the symbolism associated with particular fauna. The study also explores their relationship with other creatures and how the sculptors and craftsman have perceived their innate behaviour.

For this purpose, temples were chosen which were either built by the rulers of the Paramara dynasty or established during the period when they were ruling in Malwa. The Paramara dynasty, contemporary to the Chandellas of Khajuraho and Chalukyas of Gujarat, rose to power in the tenth century CE and ruled until the thirteenth century. They established numerous temples in their vast kingdom which comprised a massive part of present Madhya Pradesh, and parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat. The examples of fauna are taken from the renowned Paramara temples of Western and South Western Madhya Pradesh.

The first animal that devotees come across in Paramara temples is the elephant which is one of the most depicted animals in Indian temples. The elephants can be seen on the base moulding of temples and sometimes on the upper portion of the pillars. There are two ways in which elephants are depicted in Paramara temple. One type of representation shows elephants as load bearers. Their massive body and physical strength make them suitable for this work and their presence at the base suggests that the weight of the temple lies on them and perfectly conveys the idea of power and strength.

In Chaubar Dera temple II¹⁾ such a depiction of elephants can be seen in high relief, which creates a sense of enormity (Plate 1). Elephants are shown standing motionlessly, facing front, close to each other in a row. Another imagery can be seen on the pillars found from the ruins of the temple at Jhar in Ratlam²⁾ where elephants are shown seated frontally in a square frame on the top portion of the pillar.

¹⁾ It is one of the largest temples in the group of Paramara temples which were built in the 11th–12th century CE in a small village called Un in the Khargone district.

²⁾ The ruins of the temple found in the village of Jhar in Ratlam district, reflect Paramara style and are assignable to the 11th century CE.

In the second type of representation, elephants are shown in combat. They played an important role in warfare in ancient India and were used as beasts of burden during the medieval period and accompanied the army.³⁾ Royal armies were comprised of Infantry, cavalry, elephants and charioteers. One of the reasons for using elephants in warfare is their ready availability in India. Due to their massive body, they were used in defence, attacking the fort walls and sweeping the infantry. It is also easy to keep eyes on the enemies while mounting the elephants. Their presence had a psychological impact on the enemy's army therefore they were considered a valued possession by the kings.

The depiction of the royal army can be seen on the base mouldings in many Paramara temples. Marching, Combating and aggressive elephants (Plate 1) are depicted on the base of the Shiv temple at Rajapura.⁴⁾ Their depictions seem real and naturalistic as many elephants are shown colliding with the enemy elephant forcefully. Their strength and destructive nature in the battlefield is suggested by showing some elephants slipping and falling down, causing the soldiers sitting on their back to jump and even get crushed.

Another animal which has been associated with military prowess is the horse. It is mentioned above that the cavalry formed an integral part of the fourfold army which include chariot, elephants, infantry and cavalry. However, the study of sculptures from the ancient to early medieval period shows that the importance of cavalry increased only after seventh century CE when chariots lost their significance.⁵⁾ Horses are favoured over other animals due to their speed and energy. The attentiveness and easy learning make horses suitable for the task of fighting. They can be trained by following the daily routine and it is easy to prepare them for fighting in the battle.

In Indian temples horses carrying soldiers (Plate 2), have been depicted mostly on base mouldings and circular ceilings. Horses are also associated with royalty and in Indian art, a king can be distinguished from the others by royal paraphernalia which includes a horse and parasol. In Mahakal temple at Dharad⁶⁾ depiction of a royal couple riding on a horse (Plate 2) is found

³⁾ Sinha (1995: 51)

⁴⁾ The Shiva temple at Rajapura, situated in the Ratlam district, was built by the Paramaras and dates back to the 11th-12th century CE.

⁵⁾ Anjum, (2011: 1247-1248)

⁶⁾ A twelfth century Shiva temple situated at the small village known as Dharad in Ratlam district.

on the spire of the Sanctum. The royal couple is shown seated on a royal horse, followed by an attendant who is carrying a parasol. The horse, carved in profile, has bridle and saddle. It is shown in motion, as suggested by the leg movement.

There are other energetic, wild, fierce and untameable animals carved in Paramara temples such as the *Śārdūla*, a mythical creature also known as *Vyāla* and *Virāla*. It has the body of a lion and the head of other animals and birds. There are sixteen types of *Śārdūla* mentioned in *Samrāṅgaṇasūtradhāra* and *Aparājitaprc̥ha*.⁷⁾ When the *Śārdūla* has the body of a lion and head of an elephant it is called Gajaviral, Nara-Viral if the head is of a Man and likewise.

Stella Kramarisch has discussed that the presence of *Śārdūla* in the temple is associated with the belief that *Śārdūla* is the manifestation of the unmanifested *Vak*, the utterance, the articulated voice in the embodiment of a powerful Lioness. When *Śārdūla* are shown with royal knights in a long series which looks like a creeper pattern, denotes *Prakriti* (nature). *Vak* in the form of Lioness, *Shakti* (power) and *Prakriti* protects the gods and undermines the enemies.⁸⁾

There are several depictions of *Śārdūla* found in the Paramara temples. The *Śārdūla* ridden by the royal knights have been engraved on the doorframe of the unfinished temple (Plate 3) and Siddheshwar temple at Nemawar⁹⁾. They are depicted in a rampant posture, carrying the royal knight on their back. They have muscular bodies, well developed manes marked by incised lines and they have an open mouth and wide eyes. The knights are shown holding swords in one hand and from the other hand they are holding another *Śārdūla*'s tail. It is a common motif in Indian temple art but its presence in temples symbolises the lordly power of the wild beast and Lordly power (Rajanya) in general.¹⁰⁾

As mentioned above *Śārdūla* are also depicted with the body and head of the *Sim̐has* (Lion) which also get represented in Paramara temples. It is said that *Sim̐has* should be placed on high altars and above the throne of the

⁷⁾ Kumar (2018: 70223)

⁸⁾ Kramrisch, (1976: 332)

⁹⁾ Siddheshwar temple is situated on the bank of the Narmada river in Dewas district. The Unfinished temple is situated near the Siddheshwar temple. Both temples belong to the twelfth century CE.

¹⁰⁾ Kramrisch, (1976: 336).

Supreme Being.¹¹⁾ *Simhas*, from the early period are associated with virtue and morality and it was under the Gupta period when the image of the Lion hunted by the King and the Lion as the personification of royal power gets consolidated.¹²⁾ *Simhas* in the Paramara temples are carved on the base mouldings, the panel above door lintel, and at the ridge of the Front antefix.

Simhas are also depicted in two different manners. When they are shown near divinity they are depicted standing or roaring. In another depiction, *Simhas* are shown pouncing upon an elephant. According to Pushkar Sohoni, the image of the battle between lion and elephant become a standard theme in Indian temples after the seventh century CE and was used until the Maratha period. The image remained the same with minor variation but received multiple meanings in this duration. One of the meanings applied to this image symbolises the overcoming of virtue and morality over unrefined and untamed power.¹³⁾

The depiction of *Simhas* can be seen in Chaubar Dera Temple I¹⁴⁾ on the architrave placed above the door lintel which depicts goddesses (Plate 4). The *Simhas* are carved in a stylised manner, standing with one paw raised. They have large bulging eyes and wide-open mouths as if they are roaring. In the Shiv temple at Rajapura, the base moulding shows *Simha* attacking an elephant in many places. There is an exceptional image found on the same site which shows a man about to hunt a lion with a bow and arrow (Plate 4). This image might be the King's lion hunt mentioned by Sohoni. In the Jamleshwar Temple, Jamli, Dhar¹⁵⁾, *Simha* is shown pouncing upon an elephant on the ridge of the Front antefix (Plate 4). The visual imagery reflects the predation in general where the prey is being caught by the predator but this particular depiction symbolises the overcoming of the spirit over the materialistic world.

Apart from the massive animals, birds like *Hamsa* (Swan) and geese were used to adorn the temples. The representation of the goose can be seen on the pillars since the Maurya period and continued to be depicted in later times.

¹¹⁾ Kramrisch (1976: 333–334).

¹²⁾ Sohoni (2016/2017: 226).

¹³⁾ Sohoni (2016/2017: 234).

¹⁴⁾ It is a Shiva temple situated in Un and dates back to the eleventh to the twelfth century CE.

¹⁵⁾ Jamleshwar temple is an orthogonal Bhumiija temple which is situated in the Jamli Village in Dhar. The temple is dedicated to Shiva and was built in the twelfth century CE.

In the Parmara temples, birds are found on the pillars, cylindrical ceilings, on the panels above door lintels, at the threshold and many times in sculptures of the female figures which are part of the pillars or placed on the brackets of the ceiling.

Haṃsa, known for higher virtues, is the visual representation of vital breath (inhaling and exhaling). It signifies the union of the Supreme Being and those who proceeded from him.¹⁶⁾ Paramara pillars are adorned with the band of birds, shown eating and preening but never flying. Such depictions of *Haṃsa* are found on the pillars of Chaubar Dera II of Un (Plate 5), temple ruins of Kupda¹⁷⁾ and on the threshold of the main sanctum of Shiv temple at Rajapura. From Buddhi Mandu¹⁸⁾ a panel is recovered which depicts birds in bold relief, eating food from vegetation and another panel is carved with a figure of a bird in a round medallion, placed next to a female figure.

Haṃsa and goose, also known for delicate beauty, perfectly reflect the notion of feminine beauty when depicted with female figures. Such pleasing images of feminine beauty are found in many Paramara temple where women are shown with birds. From the Virupaksha temple¹⁹⁾ at Bilpank, a nude lady is depicted on a pillar, rinsing her hair and a swan, standing on a lotus at the bottom, mistaken water drops as pearl, sipping the drops falling from her hair. A Similar depiction of the lady and swan is depicted on the ceiling of the same hall and from Rajapura (Plate 5). Kamal Chavan has brought attention to the difference found in the description of the famous motif of *Saddasnāta* or *Karpūramanjiri* in literature and visual representation. According to him, the ancient treatise does not include *Haṃsa* in the description of *Saddasata* but in visual representation, *Haṃsa* is depicted swallowing the water drops. This motif evokes the pleasing imagery of Swan described in Sanskrit literature where it feeds only pearls.²⁰⁾

¹⁶⁾ Kramrisch (1976: 344–345)

¹⁷⁾ The temple ruins found at the Village Kupda in Ratlam is situated in proximity to the Shiv temple at Rajapura.

¹⁸⁾ Budhi Mandu is situated near present day Mandu. From this hill site archaeological evidence of a group of temples has been found which were built in Paramara style and belong to the eleventh- twelfth century CE.

¹⁹⁾ Virupaksha temple is a Shiva temple, situated at the village of Bilpank in Ratlam. The temple, built in the early eleventh century CE, has a restored sanctum sanctorum but the pillared hall is the original structure.

²⁰⁾ Chavan (1993: 29–38).

It is remarkable how certain animals and birds are preferred to be depicted in Indian temples to represent deeper meaning and convey certain notions. Their fixed place in the temples provides them contextual meaning. The study of the fauna in Paramara temples reveal that the idea of power and strength is conveyed through the depiction of elephants by portraying them as load bearers or showing combat.

The depiction of horses reflects the same notion of the royalty and power. Their depiction is limited and shows them either as a valuable possession of royal army or as important regalia. The mythical creature *Śārdūla*, mostly depicted with the royal knights on the doorframe, is the most powerful creature and symbolises the lordly power. It is the manifestation of the utterance, nature and power due to which *Śārdūla* acquires the highest place in the hierarchy.

Śārdūlas are mostly shown with the body and head of *Simha*, another wild beast, known for power. *Simhas* are the emblem of fame and glory and are carved either on the base, above the door lintel or at the ridge of the front antefix of the temple. When they are shown pouncing over the elephant, they convey a different meaning of overpowering of the virtues and morality over untamed power. It also reflects the act of predation and shows *Simha* as superior to the elephant.

Birds such as *Haṁsa* and goose also found their place in temples. They are depicted on the thresholds of the sanctum and pillars and it is difficult to make a distinction between the two birds. *Haṁsa* is the visual representation of vital breath and symbolises the union of the Supreme Being and those who proceeded from him. The same bird, known for high virtues, symbolises delicate beauty and in the Paramara temples used to reflect the notion of feminine beauty by showing them sipping water drops from the wet hair of the lady. It can be said that the faunal representation we come across in the temples are not mere decorative motifs but has functional motive and represent deep meanings. The main architect and sculptor, aware of the value given to these creatures in mythology, literature and society, has used them consciously to convey certain notions.

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1. Base moulding, Shiva temple, Rajapura (upper), Base moulding Chaubar Dera II, Un (Lower).



2. Horse, Base moulding, Chaubar Dera II, Un (Upper), Man ridding Horse, Rajapura (Lower, Proper Right), Royal Couple on Horse, Shiva temple, Dharad (Lower, Proper Left).



3. Shardulas with Knight riders, Door frame, Unfinished Temple, Nemawar.



4. Simha on architrave, Chaubar Dera I (Upper), Lion pouncing over Elephant, Shiva temple, Jamli (Lower, Proper Right), Man hunting Lion Rajapura (Lower, Proper Left).



5. Hamsa on Pillar, Chaubar Dera II, Un (Proper Right), Lady and Swan Rajapura (Proper Left).