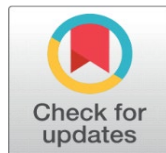
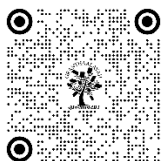


## REPRESENTATION OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIAN ART: AN OVERVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

The relation between human and animals and its association in our daily activity is unavoidable. From its representation as a visual element in calendar art to the logo design for a brand, animals are the most viewed object in literary and art works. They play a very important role in understating the ecological efficacies to create an organised equilibrium in the nature. The notion of adopting animals as visual images has age old tradition in Indian mythology in prominent, which enriches the sacred texts of Hindu beliefs with narratives of greater wisdom and values through the characters like Hanuman-Monkey God as one of such portrayal. The projections of presenting animal motifs in our art and culture infuse a sense of respect for the animals which crowns the Indian Art tradition from ancient to present time. The paper explores the presence of animals as visual motifs in the chronological development of Indian art in understanding the role of animals in our culture and tradition.

**Keywords:** Anthropomorphic, Motifs, Iconography, Relief, Mythology

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Presence of animals play an important part in our life, where the role in ecological balance is the most significant as well as the discourse of companionship with human society. The existence of animals and its human association is well depicted from the early cave walls/surfaces of Altamira to the seals of Indus Valley civilization. The narratives find the depiction of acts of hunting animals been the primal source of communication made then. If we look into the Indian context, one can find a very diverse set of animal kingdom which are well-defined in mythology apart from domesticated approach of keeping animals for livelihood, transportation, agriculture etc. [Jain \(2003\)](#)

Connotation of animals finds a distinct role as God and Goddesses in Hindu religious practices and belief and mythology. The imagery carries iconographic expressions of animals like elephant, serpents, bull, monkey, boar, other anthropomorphic forms etc. that establishes the belief of the presence of supreme power in visual forms which is a part of our daily life and faith where the depiction takes the shape of belief and reliance in printed form like post cards, posters and more precisely a calendar design with an image of devotion printed on it having the practical usage of organizing days. Such imagery representations had a significant role to play when God and goddesses depicted in diverse role as both masculine and feminine force. The most prominent being elephant headed God - *Ganesha*, Monkey god - *Hanuman* etc. (Figure 1). The presence of animals is also prominent where the god and goddess also hold on with the authority of having animals as their *Vahana* (vehicle), the most expressive being depiction of Goddess *Durga* with Lion, Lord *Shiva* with bull, snakes, scorpion, (Figure 2). *Ganesha* with a rat and many more such metaphoric aspects is well depicted in mythology Zimmer (2015). The interest attaches with the wild animals from our perception and association with the folklore and the legendary belief. Some 30 different mammals are mentioned by name in the Vedas, among which the elephant carries significant role as celestial object being the vehicle of *Indra* whose sanctity is enhanced by the belief that eight elephants guard the eight celestial points of the compass Prater (2018). Lion, tiger, mongoose, boar and monkey, rhinoceros, porcupine, tree squirrels find space in Vedic texts and epics as well carries an importance message for protection through discourses of belief and faith.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Printed Images of Lord Hanuman and Ganesha from the Popular Medium of Calendar Design

Source <https://www.art365.in/calendar-art>

Figure 2



**Figure 2** Printed Image of Goddess Durga and Lord Shiva Accompanied with Vahana (Vehicle) from a Popular Medium of Calendar Design and Post Card.

Source <https://www.art365.in/calendar-art>

## 2. ANIMALS ON SEALS AND ROCK SURFACES

To begin with, the presence of animals in Indian art, the steatite seals from Harappan and Mohenjo Daro excavations, displays creatures like tiger, bison, elephant, one-horned rhinoceros, hare, crocodile, antelope, horse, bull, and many such composite animal forms, presents a unique feature of craftsmanship and mysterious sense of communication device (Figure 3). The symbolic impression depicts various shapes - both organic shapes and geometric were used for authoritarian as well as functionality purpose. The seals also had carved features like letterforms, textual and inscriptions to ornate the space around the central figure. The companionship attribute of animals is evident in many such seals where tiger, elephant, deer, buffalo, were carved in relief gives an impression of the surroundings they dwell on Craven (1997). For example, a famous seal from Mohenjo Daro depicts the concept of deity where a seated Yogi upon a throne is seen surrounded by animals which typify the sense of love towards the animal kingdom with their presence in the seal. Along with baked seals, pottery made a distinct presence as an object of functional importance of daily usability, decorated with geometric designs and a unique stylization approach with animal, fish and plant patterns as element of ornamentation Agrawala (2022). A well-defined approach of using animal motifs is also evident in terracotta votive lamps and toys from the Harappan excavations as well. These art objects made a decisive role in understanding the relation between man and animal. But it is also apparent from the Harappan creations that the wild animals were depicted in a reliable manner and not in an act of human and animal conflict. The primitive cave or rock paintings were probably the first works of visual art created on the Indian subcontinent where the largest concentrations appear in Central India, on sandstone rock shelters. The surfaces had either animal seen in conflict discourses with humans where hunting scenes were well preserved showing human figures carrying bows and arrows or even sword and shield records the act of livelihood and sustainability Craven (1997).

**Figure 3****Figure 3** Steatite Seals Showing Diverse Set of Animals from Indus Valley Civilization

Source harappa.com

### 3. ANIMAL ON STONES AND RELIEF WORKS

One could cite many more references from numerous sacred texts concerning animal kingdom of India, but the issue of conservation and protection of animals is evident from Indian sub-continent [Prater \(2018\)](#). Ashokan edicts columns, dating from c. 242 BC stands at *Lauriya Nandangarh* in Bihar forms a typical depiction of erected pillars in polished sandstone, where a seated lion at the top mark the grandeur and majesty of the shaft ([Figure 4](#)). The finest and famous of all the capitals is one at Sarnath from Mauryan Period, the Lion capital, projects the dominating four royal animals-elephant, bull, lion, and horse ([Figure 5](#)), an excellent work of finest carving in totality also designated as the national emblem of the Republic of India commemorates the symbolic discourse of Dharma [Mitter \(2001\)](#). The four lions are carved in round and the other animals were seen in relief. The confident approach in depicting the animals projects the monumentality of the work where the sculptural grandeur has strong affiliations with Persian and Achaemenid influence is evident on the anatomical details of the lions [Craven \(1997\)](#). If we look into the histories of ancient Indian art from *Mauryan, Shunga, Andhra, Kushana, Gupta* followed by Post Gupta periods to Southern part dominated by *Pallavas, Cholas* and *Hoysalas*, we find diverse sets of intricate animal figures - elephant, monkey, multi hooded serpent, lion, tiger, deer, carved out of stone from rock cut sanctuaries, reliefs, railing medallion, pillars etc. depicting events from the Jataka tales from the life of Buddha and Hindu subjects. As we move on, the rock cut monuments in the form of chambers from *Shunga* period which are the most impressive, where narratives on non-Buddhist subject also find space for artistic exploration featuring animals seen activity participating in the celestial exercise [Jain \(2003\)](#). One such example is from a relief of *Surya* and *Indra* flanking the doorways at *Bhaja* is seen with animal figures - elephants and horses. The animal motifs were rough in their character with a dominance being massive in their appearance is quite impressive in style and execution [Mitter \(2001\)](#). Few other narrative scenes on the relief works on the medallion also have Buddhist legends, one of them depicting the dream of queen *Maya*, a more dramatic presence of an elephant is depicted hovering around. The animals had an elaborated ornamentation. The animal motifs on stones surfaces and reliefs not only restricted to mammals like elephants and lions in particular, but also serpents, mythical creatures' dwells in

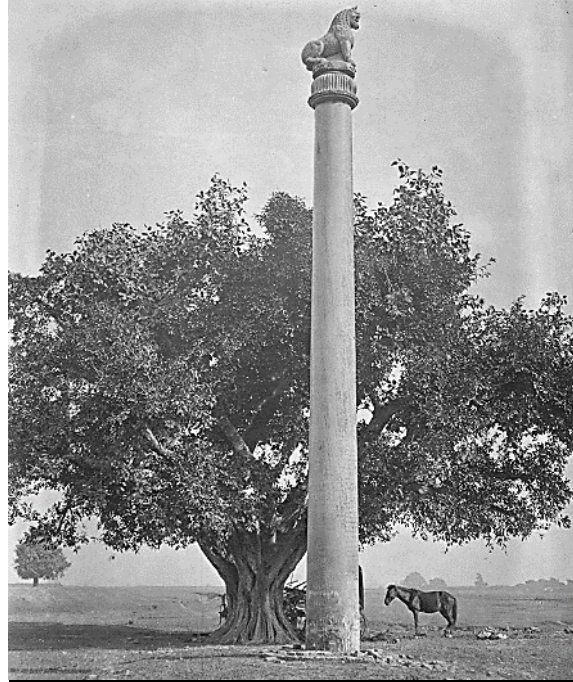
water and other symbolic animal figures which is prominent in *Bharhut* monuments.

The dominance of the magnificent animal like elephant, lion is also visible during the reign of the Andhra period, the most promising being the *Sanchi Stupa*, where stone carved gates has presented unique modelling of animal motifs in a very sophisticated and complex mannerism of sculpting stone surfaces ([Figure 6](#)). The motifs are in round as well as in relief with subjects commemorating *Jataka* stories with peacock, horse, seated elephant, and lion in prominent [Ketkar \(2015\)](#). One essential aspect of depicting the animal motifs in action, made an important transition in Indian Art from a static sense of carving stones to a more powerful approach in depicting stories was remarkable during the Andhra reign.

A far-reaching sophistication in the sculptural works is seen in ancient Indian Art during the *Kushana* period where two distinct approach - Gandharan and Mathuran sculpture surpasses the art of carving stones with precise craftsmanship and detailing. The events shown on the relief are very much formal in their compositional aspects where a central figure dominated the narration with other figures on both the sides. The composition is characterized by the presences of animals - monkey, deer, horse, boar, and elephant and camel who actively involved in the narration. One such example from the relief depicting onslaught of *Mara* from the section of a panel from Gandhara shows the unique composition of arrangements of human and animal figure. The Mathuran style had many seated Buddha figure with lion as a part of the throne unlike Gandharan standing figurative compositions with animal motifs in relief in a more formalised position [Craven \(1997\)](#).

The eroded Kushana style in Mathura made a direction to emerge into a more refined stylisation of the sculptural wonders in representing the artistic grandeur of Buddhist art and religiosity during the Gupta Period. But the animal motifs unlike in *Shunga*, *Andhra* or *Kushana*, carry a distinct character that took a culminated form of expression with Hindu iconographic formulation with the Brahminical subject. For example, the rock cut shrine at Udayagiri ([Figure 7](#)) presents the embodiment of Vishnu as a boar, represents the significance of animals as a planetary embodiment and other anthropomorphic creatures like multi hooded serpent, hybrid animal, and other aquatic creatures made a distinct appearance in the relief works [Murthy \(2011\)](#). The Post Gupta period presents one of the greatest monolithic engineering marvels, the Kailasanatha Temple from Ellora dedicated to Lord Shiva also house animals like elephant and the most important a bull -Nandi, the vehicle of Lord Shiva from Hindu subject. The southern part of India, culminating to be a center for artistic exploration is well evident with the Pallavas art works at Mamallapuram reliefs where outstanding in nature. The relief had many such compositional elements with animal motifs like elephants, serpents, lion, buffalo, and boar is well defined in articulation of anatomical expertise and typical of Hindu mythology and subjects [Craven \(1997\)](#).

**Figure 4**



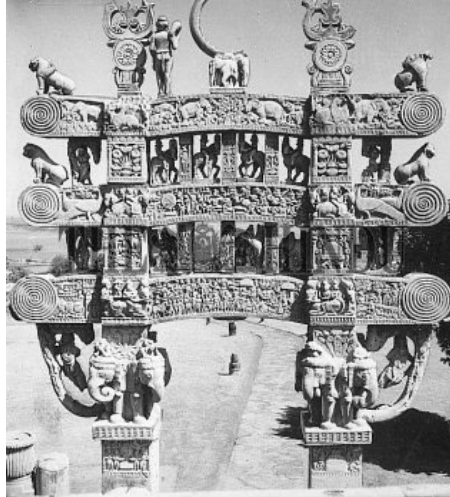
**Figure 4** Lauriya Nandangarh Edict Pillar Erected by Ashoka  
Source <https://www.merepix.com/>

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** Lion Capital, Ashokan Pillar at Sarnath  
Source <https://smarthistory.org/>

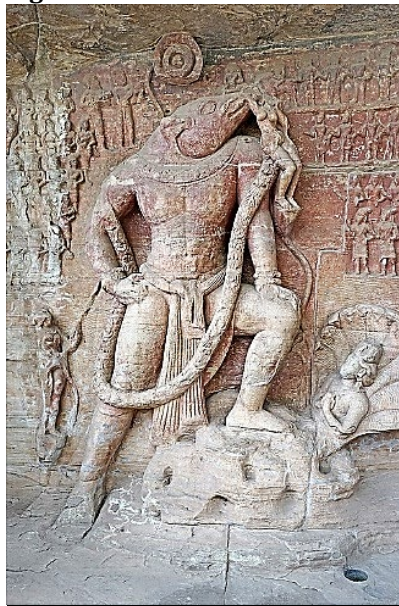
**Figure 6**



**Figure 6** Sanchi, Great Stupa, Inner Face of the North Gate

Source <https://thehinduimages.com/>

**Figure 7**



**Figure 7** Vishnu as the Cosmic Boar, Udayagiri Cave

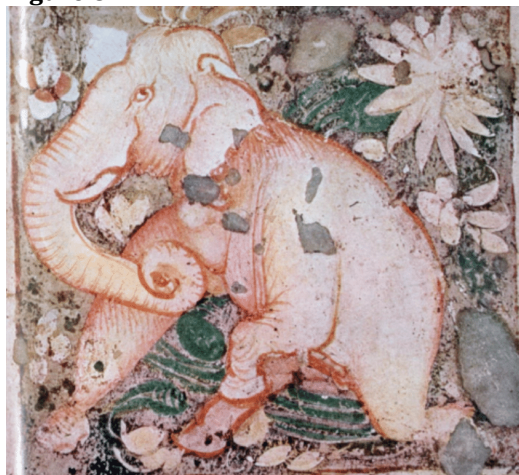
Source <https://www.worldhistory.org/>

#### **4. ANIMALS ON PAINTED SURFACES**

Apart from the relief works and stone carvings on temple architecture, rock cut caves, shrines, ancient Indian Art also had great number of paintings to explore the artistic imagination. Ajanta cave walls has many such paintings which also features animals like horses, bull, birds, monkeys from Jataka stories in a continuous narration, provides a vivid glimpse of the artistic elegance with a unique technical exploration of fresco where the grandeur of the elephant in lotus pond in prominence is adopted for the logo for Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. (Figure 8 & Figure 9). The Islamic invasion formulated unique Islamic architectural design which is prominent in minarets, mausoleum, tombs, and mosques where

motifs were restricted to Islamic calligraphy and floral designs. But it was during the reign of Akbar, animal motifs become prominent in the Mughal miniatures Mitter (2001). The typical Mughal School of painting went into develop subjects in illuminated manuscripts where various animals like squirrel, deer, bear, birds, and elephant, recorded by artists in rich sparkling colours to commemorate the legacy of exclusive had the narration of realism where many of the action-packed occurrence from Akbar miniature showcased the grandeur of the majestic elephant (Figure 10). A distinctive approach however is evident during the reign of Jahangir where naturalism inspired from European pictures, made a contrast to the realistic approach of painting done during the reign of Akbar. Animal painters during his reign went into document the natural history with an objective to record the resources (Figure 11). Animal motifs were well depicted in Indian art as we move through Deccan, Rajasthani, Pahari painting tradition and subsequently the European presence with much experimentation with technical innovations in depicting subjects where elephant can be seen as both enraged and elusive representation Mitter (1992). Rajasthani and Pahari artists had the inclination for the Mughul novelties, but their approach to the temperament of the painting were quite different with narratives on foliage and animals in processions, hunting scenes and real events were evident unlike earlier works depicting Jaina saints, gods and patrons Craven (1997). The association of animals seems to be aggravated with the conflict between the domesticated and wild animals where the ruler is often seen involve in hunting. The artist recorded the scenes of forests and wild beasts in utmost chaotic and tension (Figure 12). The tribal art tradition in India also contributed immensely to develop a distinct stylisation which is prominent in Warli, and Madhubani Painting where presence of animals is well depicted on mud walls and floors in an order of understanding nature and human existence. The decorative, ritualistic, social, and utilitarian nature of representations made a decisive departure from the narrative contents that we have seen in the fine art of sculpture and paintings in Indian art tradition. The insight to Indian folk art tradition also need to be mention here where the painted surface took a new shape with the introduction of paper, watercolor, woodcut, lithography that is prominent in Kalighat paintings with the dominion of the British where the presence animal imagery created a space for representation in minimal form and colour where mythological, satirical, natural history, social obligations made a new idiom for Indian art (Figure 13).

**Figure 8**



**Figure 8** White Elephant in Lotus Pond, Panel from Cave 1, Ajanta

Source <https://www.researchgate.net/>



Figure 9



MINISTRY OF TOURISM  
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

Figure 9 Logo Design Adopted from Elephant in Lotus Pond, Ajanta

Source <https://bwhotelier.businessworld.in/>

Figure 10



Figure 10 Miniature from Akbarnama, Opaque Paint on Paper

Source <https://smarthistory.org/akbarnama-2/>

Figure 11



Figure 11 Chameleon, Opaque Water Colour, and Ink on Paper

Source <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/76015>

Figure 12



Figure 12 Maharana Jawan Singh of Mewar, Hunting Wild Boar, Gouache on Paper

Source <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/>

Figure 13

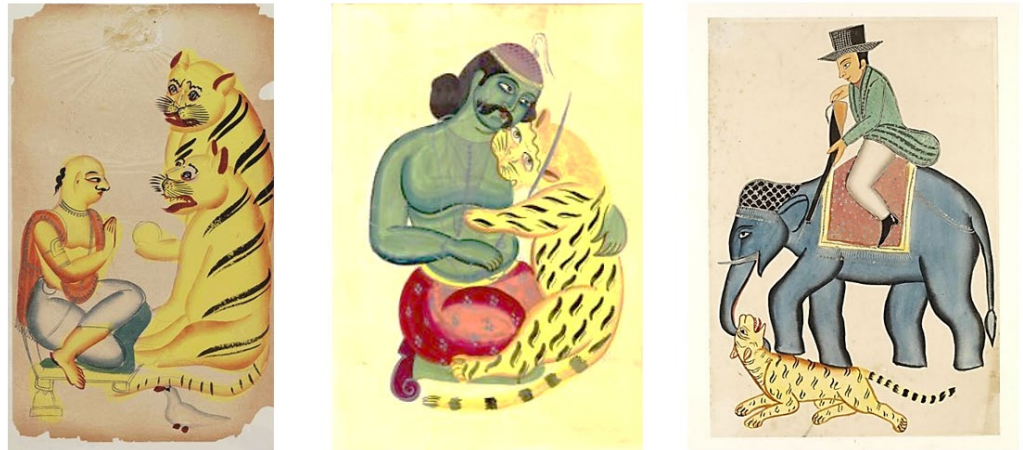


Figure 13 Images from Kalighat Painting, Opaque Watercolour on Paper

Source <https://www.google.co.in/search?q=kalighat+painting>

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is pertinent to observe that the sanctity of animal motifs took a decisive role in understanding evolution and development of the great Indian tradition of art and architecture that emerged out of a tiny steatite seals from Harrapan sites to massive rock cut artistic expression at Ellora caves Craven (1997). The narratives developed out of the chronological events that is been observed throughout the overview on the presence of animals as an element of iconography, religiosity, royalty, divinity, and the obvious story telling traditions accelerates the culminating aspects of Buddhism and Brahminical and Hindu cult in ancient Indian Art where the manifestation of animal motifs took a significant role in understanding the relation between nature and man. It is also crucial to find that the animal imagery play an important role in appreciating the mythological axioms that was recorded on

painted and stone surfaces in both vigour and fragility that is well marked in the storytelling approach of the sculptor and master craftsman who made a significant role in the mastery of the stone carvings in both relief and round. The spiritual manifestation of animal motifs in all the major works that is observed, showcased the inevitability for two most important animals - Elephant and Lion, whose appearance is unescapable in order to understand the narrative contents in the development of Indian Art. Other important species like the tiger, monkey, deer, and anthropomorphic creatures adorn the relief works whose presence made a deliberate approach in understanding the relation between human and animal kingdom within the gamut of sociology, mythology, religiosity, and animal behavioural pattern. The transformative approach is also evident with the changing role of the animals with the influence of regional and demographic invasions as in the case of development of Rajasthani and Pahari paintings where we can perceive the audacity of use of minimal lines, bright colour palette and simplified forms in contrast to the rough stone surfaces and polished stones as evident in Mathuran work. The study also surmises the socio cultural acceptance of the animal figures in popular print form with the acceptance of portrayal of god and goddesses from Hindu mythology that took the shape of calendar art that plays an important role in our daily life. The diverse set of prominent animals from Indian sub-continent - tiger, elephant, and lion hold an authoritative canons, which is well evident in the design of our national emblem that adorns the magnitude of our great nation. It is also apparent to understand that the issue of conservation and protection of animals cannot be overlooked with such representations of the diverse set of animal species that went into record the natural history, religious faith and practice that were well projected in Indian art in various mode of visual expression. It is obvious to see that various domesticated animals were also depicted as supportive element of embellishments that took an imperative role in the development of Indian art tradition where animals commemorate the relation between man and animal as in the case of tribal and folk-art tradition where projections have a greater sense for sustainability of the art form.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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